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## **A Spectacle Of The Odd: Constructing Otherness In The Odditoriums Of Ripley's Believe It Or Not!**

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A SPECTACLE OF THE ODD: CONSTRUCTING OTHERNESS IN THE ODDITORIUMS  
OF RIPLEY'S BELIEVE IT OR NOT!

by

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Bachelor of Arts  
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## ABSTRACT

Since Robert Ripley's inception of the concept behind Ripley's Believe It or Not! in 1918, Ripley Entertainment Inc. has continued to capture the attention of the public with their display of purportedly strange and unbelievable people, animals, and artifacts from across the globe. Using theories of categorization, Othering, materiality, the grotesque, the carnivalesque, and the gaze, this ethnographic study examines how persons and things in the company's odditoriums are constructed as odd through the arrangement and decoration of exhibits and odditorium space and through the language used in advertisements and information panels.

I argue that Ripley's uses similar techniques as sideshows and cabinets of curiosities in the construction of their exhibits as Other. Sideshows and other similar amusement attractions, such as world's fairs and ethnographic expositions, were amusement attractions where live human persons were displayed in order to emphasize differences in bodies, cultures, and abilities. Cabinets of curiosities, precursors to the modern museum, were exhibitory spaces where the wealthy kept a variety of human, animal, and natural materials that they collected from around the world. Oftentimes, the contents of cabinets of curiosities were not thoroughly contextualized. At Ripley's odditoriums, it was common to find an assortment

of objects from differing cultures of origin and time periods arranged together with little contextualization.

While there is extensive scholarship on sideshows and cabinets of curiosities, there has not been an intensive study conducted on how comparable techniques of displaying persons and things manifests at Ripley's. Furthermore, within studies of sideshows and similar attractions, there has not been a detailed examination of the role of materiality and space in the process of Othering. Thus, this study offers a holistic view of Ripley's exhibits accounting for language, visuality, materiality, immateriality, space, and the play with senses.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
ABSTRACT .....	vi
LIST OF FIGURES .....	xii
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION .....	1
1.1 OTHERING IN HISTORY AND SCHOLARSHIP .....	1
1.2 ARGUMENTS AND GUIDING QUESTIONS .....	3
1.3 THESIS OVERVIEW.....	7
CHAPTER 2: HISTORY TO THE PRESENT DAY.....	11
2.1 INTRODUCTION .....	11
2.2 RIPLEY’S BELIEVE IT OR NOT!: EARLY YEARS.....	12
2.3 RIPLEY’S BELIEVE IT OR NOT!: PRESENT DAY .....	14
2.4 HYPERMEDIATION AND INTERMEDIACY AT RIPLEY’S .....	18
2.5 EXHIBITING THE HUMAN OTHER.....	23
2.6 CABINETS OF CURIOSITIES AND THE MODERN MUSEUM.....	28
2.7 CONCLUSION.....	31
CHAPTER 3: THEORY AND METHODOLOGY .....	32
3.1 A POST-STRUCTURAL STANCE .....	32
3.2 CATEGORY CREATION: DISABILITY AND THE SAVAGE SLOT .....	33

3.3 BINARY OPPOSITION, THE CARNIVALESQUE, AND THE GROTESQUE .....	36
3.4 INSTITUTIONAL POWER AND SCIENTIFIC AUTHORITY .....	39
3.5 AGENCY OF THE MATERIAL AND IMMATERIAL WORLD .....	41
3.6 THE GAZE, THE REVERSE GAZE, AND PANOPTICISM .....	44
3.7 THE PROCESS OF INTERPRETATION AND THE PUBLIC’S AGENCY .....	47
3.8 METHODOLOGY AND POSITIONALITY .....	49
CHAPTER 4: MATERIALITY, SPACE, AND LANGUAGE .....	55
4.1 INTRODUCTION .....	55
4.2 ADVERTISEMENTS.....	56
4.3 EXTERIOR DECORATION AND LANDSCAPE .....	61
4.4 INTERIOR DECORATION, SPATIAL ARRANGEMENT, AND SENSORY EXPERIENCE ....	63
4.5 SHOCK, HUMOR, REFLEXIVITY, AND THE REVERSE GAZE.....	69
4.6 SIDESHOWS AND CABINETS OF CURIOSITIES .....	74
4.7 THE ADVENTURER TROPE .....	77
4.8 WAX BODIES: REALISM AND BINARY OPPOSITION.....	80
4.9 THE PRIMITIVE AND THE EXOTIC .....	86
4.10 “BELIEVE IT OR NOT!” AND AUTHENTICITY DISCOURSE.....	94
4.11 OTHER ASPECTS OF LANGUAGE .....	98
4.12 SOUVENIR BOOKLETS.....	99
4.13 CONCLUSION.....	105
CHAPTER 5: CASE STUDIES .....	114
5.1 INTRODUCTION .....	114
5.2 GRACE MCDANIELS: IMMORTALIZED IN WAX .....	115

5.3 FERTILITY STATUES: FROM DECORATION TO GLOBAL SENSATION .....	125
5.4 CONCLUSION.....	132
CHAPTER 6: INTERVIEWS, SURVEYS, AND REVIEWS .....	135
6.1 INTRODUCTION .....	135
6.2 INTERVIEWS OF RIPLEY’S EMPLOYEES.....	136
6.3 INTERVIEWS OF RIPLEY’S VIEWERS .....	139
6.4 SURVEYS.....	147
6.5 REVIEWS: RIPLEY’S GENRE AND RELEVANCE IN THE COMPUTER AGE .....	152
6.6 REVIEWS: AUTHENTICITY .....	159
6.7 REVIEWS: ODDITORIUM DECORATION AND SENSORY EXPERIENCE .....	161
6.8 CONCLUSION.....	165
CHAPTER 7: ETHICS OF REPRESENTATION AND DISPLAY .....	167
7.1 INTRODUCTION .....	167
7.2 CULTURAL RELATIVISM AND ETHICS IN ANTHROPOLOGICAL RESEARCH .....	168
7.3 THE DISPLAY AND TREATMENT OF HUMAN REMAINS.....	170
7.4 THE ETHICS OF REPRESENTATION AND OF LIVE DISPLAY .....	180
7.5 CONCLUSION.....	183
CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION.....	184
8.1 SUMMARY.....	184
8.2 GOALS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS .....	186
REFERENCES .....	188
APPENDIX A – INTERVIEW INFORMED CONSENT LETTER.....	201
APPENDIX B – SURVEY INFORMED CONSENT LETTER.....	203

APPENDIX C – INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR RIPLEY’S EMPLOYEES .....	205
APPENDIX D – INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR RIPLEY’S AUDIENCE.....	207
APPENDIX E – SURVEY QUESTIONS .....	209

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 4.1 Spinning Tunnel .....	107
Figure 4.2 Wax Figure of “the Skeleton Dude” .....	108
Figure 4.3 Wax Figure of Robert Wadlow .....	109
Figure 4.4 Wax Figure of Robert Earl Hughes .....	110
Figure 4.5 Photo Op of Robert Earl Hughes .....	111
Figure 4.6 Wax Figure of Walter Hudson .....	112
Figure 4.7 Wax Figures at the Myrtle Beach Odditorium .....	113
Figure 5.1 Kissing Booth of Grace McDaniels .....	133
Figure 5.2 Wax Figure of Grace McDaniels .....	134

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### *1.1 Othering in History and Scholarship*

Social scientists continue to discuss how popular media, institutions, and academic scholarship create and disseminate ideas of Otherness. “Otherness” is the status of being an “Other”, which is a term that refers to someone or something that is perceived as extremely different or as deviating from societal norms. Others are only identified through recognition of who or what is considered as meeting social expectations of behavior and appearance. Othering is used in the delineation of who belongs to the “us” group versus who belongs to the “them” group. (Kingsolver 2011, 6; Sturken and Cartwright 2001, 93-104). Entire groups of people, individual persons, objects, or aspects of the environment can be subjected to Othering.

Media and institutions in education and popular culture, such as universities, museums, news channels, celebrity images, and scientific journals and photographs, are largely accepted as authoritative sources of presenting who falls in the norm category and who should otherwise be labeled as Other (Ames 1992; Hall 1997a/b; Lutz and Collins 1993; Wallis 1996; Solometo and Moss 2013; Sturken and Cartwright 2001). Social scientists have theorized that worth and power are embedded within Otherness because people who are regarded as Other are often treated as inferior, and they usually experience

forms of discrimination like unequal access to resources and services. A prime example in the history of the United States was the presentation of Native Americans and Africans as so completely Other that genocide, slavery, segregation, and assimilation policies had been allowed to persist. Both groups still experience hardships from the continual Othering practices by persons who desire to maintain in power. Consequently, the topic of Otherness continues to be a worthwhile pursuit.

The literature on Otherness is quite abundant. Scholars of gender, ethnicity, and race write about the ways that women, non-white individuals, and persons who do not meet heteronormative standards are persistently presented as Other and have to endure disadvantages as a result (Anzaldúa 1987; Butler 1991; Collins 1990; Du Bois 1903; Gates 1986; Hartigan 1997; Ong 1996; Said 1978). Academics note the increasing popularity of magazines and television programs that present bodily Otherness via the display of individuals who purportedly have poor fashion sense, who are overweight, who are underweight, who supposedly need plastic surgery, and who allegedly look too old for their age (Braun 2005; Kulick and Meneley 2005; Moore and Kosut 2010). Another dominant trend within this literature has been the examination of how the Otherness of people is highlighted in past and current sideshows (also referred to as “freak shows”), world expositions, and cultural tourism (Adams 2001; Bogdan 1988; Breitbart 1997; Chemers 2008; Desmond 1999; Fordham 2007; Wells et. al 1999; Stephens 2005). Even though scholars in disciplines like anthropology and sociology have sought to objectively present the cultures and bodies of their subjects, ultimately they have critiqued how their works also perpetuate ideas of the Other (Douglas 1986; Fabian 1983; Trouillot 1991).

Over the years, I have been interested in the ways that Otherness is presented through language and visual representations, but I struggled to find my niche in the literature. One December day in 2014 out of nostalgia for my childhood, I watched an episode of *Ripley's Believe It or Not!* hosted by Dean Cain in the early 2000s. The company who produces the show is Ripley Entertainment Inc., but I simply refer to them as Ripley's throughout the thesis. Other than the television shows, Ripley's has produced radio programs, books, daily newspaper comics, animated cartoons, museums, games, and YouTube videos. They also have a presence on social media like Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, and Instagram. The purpose of the show and of the *Ripley's Believe It or Not!* brand is to shock their audience with the supposedly strange cultural practices, artifacts, abilities, and bodies of people and animals from around the world.

While watching the show, it became apparent that the artifacts and cultural practices are also displayed in anthropological museums or have been studied by anthropologists. I began to wonder how Ripley's presentations of people differed from that of anthropologists and how Ripley's is able to market their exhibits as truly strange and unbelievable. Moreover, since Otherness and strangeness are synonymous, I thought that Ripley's would offer insight into the construction and presentation of Otherness. Other than a biographical account written about the founder of Ripley's and brief articles on the company's media and odditoriums, no in-depth research has been conducted of Ripley's.

## *1.2 Arguments and Guiding Questions*

In this thesis, I argue that Ripley's constructs and communicates Otherness through the decoration, arrangement, and language of exhibits found in their museums. Major players in the process of constructing Otherness include the company's president,



managers and franchise owners of the odditoriums, and the staff at Ripley's headquarters. Because other forms of Ripley's media would require a lengthy examination to fully understand their richness, the museums are the focus of my analysis. Ripley's refers to their museums as "odditoriums," and the people and objects displayed inside are sometimes called "oddities." Since *odd* is the root morpheme in both terms and means to deviate from the normal, I argue that oddness equates Otherness. In this case then, an oddity is someone or something that is demarcated as Other. Additionally, odditorium is a play on *auditorium*, which is a place where an audience can be entertained or educated through theater, concerts, or lectures. This play on auditorium is fitting for Ripley's which seeks to both entertain and educate their audience.

Other names that Ripley's audience and employees use to refer to the exhibits include curiosities, curioddities, and Believe It or Nots! (or BIONS for abbreviation). I frame my examination of how Ripley's constructs Otherness within an analysis of how they are able to market their exhibits as odd. Underlying my argument is the theorization that the Other category is socially constructed; people are not inherently odd and Other, but rather, that status is assigned to them. Furthermore, ideas of who is Other differ cross-culturally and over time.

I further argue that Ripley's odditoriums are reminiscent of two genres of exhibition and that Ripley's uses techniques from these genres in constructing Otherness. One genre is the cabinet of curiosities wherein objects were displayed generally without in-depth information and often without organization by chronology, artifact type, or culture of origin (Jenkins 1994). Next, Ripley's uses similar techniques as historical attractions that had the explicit purpose of exhibiting Otherness. Examples of these attractions include sideshows,

world expositions, human zoos, and ethnographic villages. In particular, Ripley's has a strong connection to sideshows. Most scholarship on the topic has focused on living displays of people in past sideshows, world expositions, and circuses, but less attention has been given to how the legacy of blatantly exhibiting Otherness still manifests in current media forms such as cultural tourism, television programs, and museums. I argue that Ripley's Believe It or Not! odditoriums continue this legacy

Given the history in which displaying the purported Otherness of people has had negative consequences, it is understandable why past scholarship has focused on criticizing those who engage in constructing Otherness. However, it is not my intention to espouse views for or against Ripley's as a spectrum of opinions on the exhibitions exists among their employees and audience. In other words, while I argue that Ripley's has an array of techniques to emphasize the differences of people's cultures and bodies, I am not arguing whether this is good or bad of Ripley's to do. For instance, I will discuss in Chapter Five how some viewers and employees of Ripley's think that the company is celebrating and appreciating difference whereas other viewers disagree and have challenged Ripley's presentation of difference. Nevertheless, I am not claiming to be wholly objective or neutral as that is impossible for any researcher to do. I have experienced negative reactions to a few of Ripley's exhibits, instigating me to ponder about the ethics of representation. However, I am not using my personal reactions to make a claim that the employees of Ripley's are unethical people.

At this stage in my research, I cannot offer an in-depth discussion of how people interpret and react to Ripley's exhibits as that was not my central goal. Rather, the main purpose of this research was to understand how Otherness is constructed and

communicated through language and the decoration and arrangement of the built environment. I do, nonetheless, offer a brief analysis throughout the thesis of people's interactions with and discussions of the exhibits in order to obtain an initial assessment of the success of Ripley's techniques to communicate Otherness.

Historically, the Euro-American white male who has dominated in colonialism, politics, economics, and academic disciplines, has had the most power in deciding who is relegated to the category of the Other. The Euro-American white male considered his body and cultural practices to be not only the norm but also the pinnacle of evolution (Chemers 2008; Fabian 2002; Trouillot 1991; Wallis 1996). Thus, people who were not white or male and who were from non-Western places were lumped together in the category of the Other. Although I do not claim that current Ripley's employees present their cultures as superior, it is worth noting that Ripley's has always been an American institution. As I discuss in the next chapter, Ripley's was founded in the United States by a white American male, and though their odditoriums are now globally located, the decision of who and what is to be displayed in the museums is overseen by Ripley's headquarters in Orlando, Florida.

While Ripley's displays people and objects from Western countries, a high prevalence of the exhibits include cultural practices and artifacts of people from non-Western places. I chose then to focus on Ripley's contemporary exhibitions of non-Western people and artifacts. In order to illustrate how Ripley's relates to the sideshow genre, I additionally focus on Ripley's presentation of so-called deviant bodies which includes the bodies of Euro-American persons.

The following are questions that guide my research: Who and what are presented as odd by Ripley's, and what is the process in which the exhibits are chosen? What are the

techniques of displaying people and objects to construct them as odd? How does the arrangement of exhibition space and the chosen mode of display affect the audience's sensory experiences and interactions with the exhibits? What have been audience responses to and interactions with the exhibits? How does Ripley's compare to other amusement attractions and media in presenting cultural and bodily Otherness? Finally, what anthropological tropes of the Other manifest at Ripley's? This last question is explored because Robert L. Ripley (1890-1949), the founder of Ripley's, has been described by the public as an amateur anthropologist despite never receiving anthropological training (Thompson 2013, 188 and 202). Like an anthropologist, descriptions of cultural practices and bodies of people by Mr. Ripley and by the current Ripley's company have been disseminated globally, and they have attempted to support their representations of people through artifacts, wax models, and ethnographic photos. As previously stated, anthropologists have also played a role in presenting the Otherness of people that they study. Thus, this thesis also examines how the techniques of presenting Otherness in the discipline of anthropology compare to that of Ripley's.

### *1.3 Thesis Overview*

In Chapter Two, I contextualize Ripley's within the history of cabinets of curiosities and within the history of attractions that exhibited people to enable the reader to understand the techniques that Ripley's is utilizing to construct Otherness. Furthermore, I discuss the history of Ripley's in order to illustrate that displaying the Otherness of people has always been the agenda of the company. I examine who and what Ripley's displays as odd and how the exhibits are acquired so that the reader can have a solid understanding of the

content of an odditorium before analyzing how Otherness is constructed through that content.

In Chapter Three, I discuss the theories and methodologies that guide my analysis. My investigation of how Ripley's constructs Otherness is mainly through the framework of categorization and discourse theory and through the anthropology of space and materiality. Overall, I use these theories to take a post-structural stance of Ripley's. I conclude the chapter with a discussion of my methods of participant-observation, interviewing, survey dissemination, and visual and material analysis in addition to ethical considerations and my positionality as a researcher.

In Chapter Four, I intertwine a material and visual analysis of Ripley's odditoriums with a discussion of how the company's language plays a role in constructing the Otherness of their exhibits. My visual and material analysis of Ripley's is divided by spatial scale. In the first section of this chapter, I analyze how advertisements of the odditoriums are important in conditioning how people think of Ripley's before visiting. The next scale of analysis is how the landscape, exterior and interior decoration, and building layout of Ripley's odditoriums further creates an atmosphere of the odd and shapes visitors to view the exhibits inside as Other. Later in the chapter, on an even more minuscule level, I examine specific rooms within the odditoriums and how Ripley's guides people to walk through the rooms and interact with the exhibits in a particular way. I consider my own experience of walking through the odditorium space and observing people's actions within the rooms and interactions with specific exhibits. My discourse analysis includes a discussion of their famous phrase "Believe It or Not," of their marketing of authenticity, and of their exoticization and animalization of the exhibits. To address my question about

how Ripley's compares to the work of anthropologists, I analyze how the language of Ripley's relates to the way anthropologists have historically written about culture.

Chapter Five offers two case studies to illustrate how Ripley's transforms objects into oddities, curiosities, and Believe It or Nots! The first case study describes a wax model that Ripley's made to represent Grace McDaniels, who was a sideshow performer from the 1930s to 1950s. I talk about how the materiality, decoration, and arrangement of her wax figure has communicated the Otherness of Grace to audience members. Next, using the framework of Kopytoff's (1986) cultural biography, I present the case study of a pair of fertility statues that has become Ripley's most popular exhibit since acquisition in the 1990s. I talk about the transformation of the statues from their acquisition through the various changes they experienced in the odditoriums.

Through a discussion of odditorium reviews and the results of my interviews and surveys, Chapter Six provides an in-depth look at the spectrum of opinions that Ripley's employees and audience members have about the odditoriums' exhibits, decoration, language, and layout. I illustrate how constructing Otherness is a two-way process; it requires a creator and an interpreter. The interpreter has to be aware of what and who is deemed normal in order to grasp what the creator is trying to say about the purported non-normative person, animal, or thing.

In Chapter Seven, I present a discussion of ethics regarding the representation of bodies and the display of human remains. In addition to their presentations of disability through wax figures and photos, Ripley's displays shrunken heads, mummified body parts, and human skull bowls. While I will not take a stance regarding the ethics of Ripley's, I present this information so that readers can acknowledge the controversial nature of these

exhibits and form their own opinions regarding the ethics of such bodily displays. I conclude the thesis in Chapter Eight with a discussion that ties all of these scales of analysis and case studies together to reiterate how they help us understand the construction of Otherness and the significance of this topic.

## CHAPTER 2

### HISTORY TO THE PRESENT DAY

#### *2.1 Introduction*

In this chapter, I first present the history of Ripley's Believe It or Not! from the moment of the brand's conception to its current status. Unlike a narrative that is written by a historian, my historical account of Ripley's is primarily based on secondary sources and does not provide details of chronology and cause and effect. I situate Ripley's within the history of sideshows, world expositions, and other attractions that exhibited people in order to foster an understanding of the rationale behind such displays and why ultimately this type of entertainment declined. Even though the popularity of this genre of entertainment waned in the mid-twentieth century, the display of cultures and bodies has continued to manifest in other ways as I hope to exemplify in the case of Ripley's. Since it was the goal of these historical attractions to communicate the Otherness of the people on display, I present what techniques they utilized to construct the Otherness of the displayed persons and then later in the thesis analyze how Ripley's relies on the same techniques. Finally, I briefly provide a historical analysis of museums, specifically of the cabinets of curiosities, because Ripley's odditoriums seem to have a similar organization and presentation style of their exhibits. The concepts of hypermediation and intermediacy guide my description of how entertainment provided by the company has changed (Bolter and Grusin 1999).



## 2.2 Ripley's *Believe It or Not!*: Early Years

In December of 1918, Robert Ripley was struggling to think of what he could draw for the New York newspaper that he worked for as a cartoonist. He drew inspiration from a notebook wherein he documented sports records that he perceived to be amazing and unusual. He ultimately produced a cartoon titled *Champs and Chumps* that depicted these sports records and that became regarded by Ripley Entertainment Inc. as the moment when the concept for Ripley's *Believe It or Not!* was initially conceived (Ripley Entertainment Inc. 2014). People began to request similar cartoons as they enjoyed reading about feats that seemed shocking. Eventually, Ripley began to depict the purported strange and amazing people, animals, natural occurrences, and objects that he read or heard about. While Ripley sought to only draw who and what truly existed, his cartoons took on the title of *Believe It or Not!* because what was shown was often so shocking that people refused to believe him. In fact, he was frequently accused of being the world's greatest liar during his lifetime (Ripley Entertainment Inc. 2016; Thompson 2013).

The brand became even more popular once Ripley's employers started to send him on travels around the world in 1922 so that he could depict the cultural practices, abilities, and bodies of people in other countries. Ripley is reported saying: "I have traveled to 201 countries and the strangest thing I saw was man" (Ripley Entertainment Inc. 2016b). It became the goal of the *Believe It or Not!* comics to shock the American public with illustrations of people that they never knew possible to exist, which was not difficult to accomplish during the early years of the brand when not as many people could afford the expenses to travel nor was photography commonly mass produced (Ripley Entertainment, Inc. 2016b). Ripley's drawings were often people's first and perhaps only visual source of

information about foreign places and their inhabitants. For the people whose first exposure to other cultures and body types was through Ripley, Ripley's marketing of the comic's subjects as strange might more likely have been accepted. Ripley displayed people from within the United States, Europe, and other Western countries, but he had a special fascination with Asia, primarily China. India was another popularly featured place by Ripley as he thought that the behaviors of Muslim and Hindu religious ascetics, known as fakirs, seemed extreme and bizarre (Thompson 2013, 98).

Ripley expressed a mix of positive and negative attitudes toward foreigners. During his childhood in Santa Rosa, California, he was bullied at school due to his buckteeth, speech impairments, and clothes that reflected his lower-class family. As a result, he gained an appreciation for those who were similarly regarded as outcasts, and his interest in seemingly strange people likely stemmed from his feeling as an outsider. Since Ripley was bullied because of his appearance, he sympathized with performers in the freak shows that were hosted in his hometown (Thompson 2013, 12). His admiration for these people was continually expressed in cartoons and travelogues as an adult. Conversely, he frequently talked about foreigners in an ethnocentric way (Thompson 2013, 103). For instance, in his description of Benares, India, home to a large Hindu fakir population, Ripley said that the city has "the weirdest collection of humanity on the face of earth-demented, delusioned, diseased, and devout" (Thompson 2013, 99). He described South American men as "dirty and coarse" and Chileans as "evil-looking hombres" (Thompson 2013, 126-130).

In 1929, these Believe It or Not! comics became Ripley's daily newspaper feature. The comics started as a sensation in the United States but quickly became translated in newspapers all over the globe (Thompson 2013, 4). His popularity is evident in the millions

of letters that he received yearly and in a poll that revealed Ripley was the number one person who boys wanted to be like when they were older, even ranking above the U.S. president (Thompson 2013, 240). It is important to give credit to Norbert Pearlroth who was hired as Ripley's researcher. Pearlroth spent entire days for over fifty-two years finding information at the New York Public Library for Ripley's comics (Gaiter 1983).

Starting around the 1930s until his death in 1949, Ripley published his cartoons in books, and he appeared on television and in radio programs to talk about the people and things that he encountered on his travels (Ripley Entertainment, Inc. 2016b). Because who and what Ripley displayed seemed extremely strange beyond belief for numerous people, the public began to request that he bring back artifacts and either photographic or living proof. Live people were presented on his television shows and in his odditoriums. The first temporary odditorium was constructed at the Chicago World's Fair in 1933 whereas the first permanent one was established in St. Augustine, Florida in 1950 shortly after his death (Ripley Entertainment, Inc. 2016b).

### *2.3 Ripley's Believe It or Not!: Present Day*

Ripley's imprint on the mind of the public is evident in that his legacy has been continued through the development of an official Ripley's company, through the persistence of his daily newspaper cartoon that now features in forty-two countries and is drawn by a succession of artists, and through the establishment of more odditoriums, books, television shows, YouTube videos, and radio programs (Ripley Entertainment, Inc. 2016b). Present day odditoriums are located in ten countries, mostly in tourist hot spots in the U.S. Ripley's continues the agenda of presenting the supposed strangeness of people through wax representations, ethnographic photos, artifacts, and sometimes live

performance. Ripley's presents their exhibits using a broad range of technology and visuals including photography, televisions, computers, tablets, phones, holograms, information panels, oratory performances, glass-case enclosures, booklets, posters, audio, and tactile stimulation.

Ripley's has an eclectic mix of collection types. Exhibits at Ripley's include: art made with non-traditional materials such as candy, laundry lint, and recycled car parts; wax figures made in the likeness of past and current sideshow performers or of people who were not in sideshow but who had become famous for a medical condition or ability; animals with genetic mutations that have been preserved via taxidermy or whose skeletal remains are displayed; artifacts from celebrities or from major historical events; optical illusions; fortune teller machines; arcade games; and artifacts from communities worldwide that have been collected by Robert Ripley and annually since his time. Again, the focus of this thesis is Ripley's display of bodies and representations of non-Western people.

One of my key informants was Edward Meyer who is the Vice President of Exhibits and Archives for Ripley Entertainment, Inc. I interviewed him twice: once over email in which he answered questions on a Word document and the other in person at the company's office in Orlando, Florida. His roles at Ripley's include purchasing the exhibits, curating and researching the exhibits, writing the information panels on the exhibits, and aiding in the editing, producing, and directing of Ripley's cartoons, books, and films. Prior to Ripley's, he studied to be a librarian and received a four-year education at a liberal arts university. He describes his education as a librarian and interests in history, mummies, and dinosaurs as the aspects of his life that led him to a job at Ripley's. He was originally hired

to work at Ripley's for the purpose of cataloging Ripley's cartoons. In addition to himself, there is the Director of Design and Development, the Vice President of Operations, managers of the odditoriums, and the company's president who aids in the design of the exhibits (Meyer, interview, May 2015).

Curatorial work is done at Ripley's headquarters, primarily by Meyer, but he says that managers of the odditoriums can request changes or submit suggestions to them. In recording the provenance information of the exhibits, they use the TMS program which is standard for museums. I asked what qualifications are required for job positions in handling the artifacts, designing the exhibit space or media, and managing an odditorium. Meyer said that while there is no one in their staff that "has a degree in museums," the majority of the staff have bachelor's and master's degrees in a variety of disciplines. Although, managers of the odditoriums usually have experience in business management (Meyer, interview, May 2015).

While some of the odditoriums are franchises, meaning that they are owned and managed by independent entrepreneurs, they have to pay fees to the company for using their logo and renting the exhibits. These independent owners can hire their own designers, but ultimately the designs and marketing still have to be approved by Ripley's headquarters. Thus, the headquarters always makes final decisions despite the independence of the franchises. Also, as aforementioned, Meyer is one of the major players in all aspects of artifact collection and exhibition. Meyer said that the exhibits come from all over the world, and he searches for the exhibits through travel, research, contests, and through word of mouth. Holding the most authority in the company, the president ultimately decides which artifacts are worthy to be in the odditoriums. The president has

to approve what Meyer acquires, but beyond that initial decision, Meyer is the main person in charge of deciding what artifacts will be displayed and where. The artifacts are stored in Ripley's warehouse when not on display, and it is extremely rare for any of the artifacts to be sold (Meyer, interview, May 2015).

In my first interview with Meyer, he told me about the laws and policies that govern the acquisition of the exhibits. He did not provide detail about state and national laws governing the acquisition process, but he talked about the role of moral laws and the personal sense of what is right and wrong. Regarding morals, Meyer responded: "For the most part I am the moral conservative within our company. I draw the lines and adhere to a higher God's direction" (Meyer, interview, May 2015).

As Meyer has been working at Ripley's for over thirty-seven years, he is one of the most knowledgeable employees regarding the differences and similarities in the odditoriums. His input provides insight beyond my limited observations at only four of the odditoriums. According to Meyer (the following response is exactly as he wrote it):

"Fundamentally all odditoriums are different--the exhibits for the most part are one of a kind unique items---however, odditoriums do have common elements. For example several have an African fantasy coffin, but not two coffins are the same, and no two are displayed exactly the same, one maybe in a graveyard setting, one maybe in a jungle setting, one may be in the middle of an unthemed room...the only exact 'replicas' in our museums are 'wax figures,' hand-made sculptures of various personalities. A selection of these are duplicated in every odditorium, but again potentially displayed differently (eg, in a Hollywood set, driving a car, hanging from a ceiling...etc). I am asked this question a lot. I am comfortably saying the only artifact that is in every odditorium is a unique shrunken head (all are real and therefore different from each other), and a statue of the world's tallest man Robert Wadlow (but again they are not displayed the exact same way). Here I want to stress our artifacts are almost all real, despite some negative

commentary to the contrary. We do not typically display ‘replicas’ other than wax figures...the occasional exception to this is always labelled as such so as not to confuse or trick the viewer. For example we do have ‘authentic-real’ iron maiden torture chambers, but we also have ‘replica iron maidens’ in some locations, clearly identified as such” (Meyer, interview, May 2015).

When asked how Ripley’s compares to other types of museums, Meyer says that one important difference is that Ripley’s is privately owned. Because it is privately owned, they can make decisions without having to deal with levels of bureaucracy. Moreover, Meyer said that Ripley’s emphasizes fun and entertainment more than traditional museums. He said: “‘Fun’ is more important to us than to ‘traditional’ museums, but the element of a learning experience is common to all. Our goal is to educate, but in a fun way. It is important to note A) we don’t typically call ourselves a museum-we are an odditorium, and 2) we usually use the word ‘attraction’ too-suggesting an element of fun, not just learning” (Meyer, interview, May 2015). Meyer says that Ripley’s ideally balances education and entertainment, but in reality, Ripley’s is probably slightly heavier on the educational elements over entertainment (Meyer. Interview, May 2015).

#### *2.4 Hypermediation and Intermediacy at Ripley’s*

Central to the Ripley’s experience is that they draw upon a plethora of entertainment genres and juxtapose essentially all of the existing media forms. Scholarship on hypermediation and intermediacy offers insight into the significance of people’s interactions with the media interfaces themselves. Bolter and Grusin (1999) define hypermediation as the juxtaposition of multiple media forms within one space. For instance, audio, video, animations, and photography are often presented together on a website, and the computer user is allowed to choose which media to interact with (Bolter

and Grusin 1999, 6). Intermediacy is defined as the feeling that one is in the presence of an unmediated object or environment. As an example, producers of virtual reality technologies are trying to allow users to experience the technologically constructed worlds as unmediated. Bolter and Grusin state that hypermediation and intermediacy depend on each other. On the surface it would seem that hypermediacy and intermediacy are opposites since hypermediacy is always calling the user's attention to the technological interfaces and thus the fact that his or her experience is mediated; however, Bolter and Grusin argue that the purpose of hypermediation is to cause a "fullness of experience" in the activation of all of a user's senses, as would be the case in intermediacy (Bolter and Grusin 1999, 53). In an experience that is unmediated, one is typically able to hear, smell, see, and feel what is in the environment.

Ripley's Believe It or Not! has been a hypermediated brand for most of its existence. The brand began as a newspaper comic strip, but over the decades it quickly grew to include books, arcade games, phone applications, radio broadcasts, online podcasts, television shows, odditoriums, live performances, a YouTube channel, a website, and social media pages. Each media platform allows for a different experience of Ripley's exhibits. Some platforms only allow a visual interaction whereas others allow for an auditory, olfactory, and tactile engagement. Some platforms render the viewer more passive, such as books and television, while others allow for more active and participatory interaction, like walkthroughs of the odditoriums and the ability to directly communicate with Ripley's through social media. It has long been Ripley's aim to offer a fullness of experience for their viewers while simultaneously calling attention to the amazing



technologies that are currently in existence. The technologies themselves are marketed as Believe It or Nots!

Underlying the hypermediation of multiple media forms at Ripley's odditoriums is the attempt at trying to create an all-in-one experience that draws upon a variety of Ripley's entertainment styles and other past and current entertainment genres. Other than the odditoriums, Ripley's owns miniature golf courses, aquariums, haunted houses, 4D movie theaters, mirror mazes, candy stores, arcades, wax museums, and the Guinness World Records brand (Ripley Entertainment, Inc. 2016a). Despite operating these separate attractions, it seems that Ripley's tries to create the experience of all of these attractions within their odditoriums. Torture and cemetery themed rooms along with hologram ghosts create the haunted house experience. An assortment of games throughout the odditoriums recreates the arcade. The display of information on people and animals who have broken world records vis-à-vis their bodies and abilities gives a similar experience as Ripley's Guinness museums, and the abundance of wax figures that one can pose with, touch, and photograph provides the experience of a wax museum without even having to visit Ripley's actual wax museums. Beyond the simulation of their other attractions, Ripley's offers odditorium visitors the experience of amusement parks, concerts, movie theaters, arcades, fun houses, traveling, sideshows, and cabinets of curiosities.

Due to the experience of hypermediation, Ripley's is similar to amusement parks despite not being categorized as one. On one hand, hypermediation occurs at amusement parks and Ripley's because both attractions bombard visitors with an array of sounds, sights, smells, and tactile experiences through the multiple technologies incorporated. Secondly, hypermediation occurs by offering visitors experiences of various entertainment

genres. In the case of Disney, Bolter and Grusin says that the park draws upon television, music, and live theater, specifically Vaudeville (Bolter and Grusin 1999, 169).

Ripley's draws upon the genres of the concert, movie theater, and arcade. At some of Ripley's odditoriums, they arrange wax figures into the configuration of a musical band. They wire the wax figures so that their heads and mouths move in sync with song lyrics and so their hands appear to be playing musical instruments. After an odditorium visitor enjoys this wax figure concert, he or she can also experience attending the movies. All odditoriums that I visited had a room that was decorated to appear like a mini movie theater. It was designated as an area where visitors could sit and relax while watching clips of dangerous stunts and Ripley's sideshow performances. There are usually several rows of seats as one would find in a theater. If concerts and movies are not enough, Ripley's provides games throughout the odditoriums, sometimes with rooms dedicated solely to the purpose of gaming. Many of the games are those that would typically be found at an arcade such as pinball and such as "whack-a-mole" that one plays by stomping on rats and frogs that are projected on the floor. Other games include coin racing in which visitors see whose change can roll down into a well the fastest and an operation game that challenges visitors to extract objects from the board without touching the sides of the board. Some odditoriums that I visited had an actual arcade after one exits the museum but before one leaves the building.

The funhouse is another genre that Ripley's heavily connects to in entertainment style. Ripley's directly references the funhouse through the placement of distortion mirrors, some that makes the viewers appear taller, shorter, wider, or thinner than they really are. Optical illusions and trickery are also common elements at both funhouses and Ripley's.

Like at a funhouse, Ripley's is successful at evoking different feelings in the visitors like laughter, embarrassment, shock, and nausea through their illusions and trickery. Specific examples will be discussed in Chapter Four.

Ripley's has its origins in the travels of Robert Ripley whose collections around the world is the heart and soul of the brand (Ripley Entertainment, Inc. 2016b). Harkening to that past, Ripley's tries to create the experience of travel in their odditoriums. The walls and informational panels are commonly decorated with travel imagery. For instance, as one climbs the stairs to upper floors of the Gatlinburg, Tennessee odditorium, there are murals on the walls of maps, compasses, suitcases, binoculars, and of cities such as Venice, Italy. Just the act of climbing stairs, riding elevators, braving spinning tunnels, and walking over bridges simulates the experience of traveling over varying terrains. Similar to a tour guide or map, signs guide visitors through the odditorium so that they know what rooms and experiences are waiting for them ahead which builds excitement and tension.

Despite Ripley's desire to create intermediacy for the viewers through a fullness of experience, the constant bombardment of the multiple media types reminds the odditorium visitors of that mediation. A visitor cannot help but notice the frames of the technological interfaces. We see the televisions, computer and tablet screens, and cameras that create our experience. Part of Ripley's attempt at amazing the visitors is through calling attention to their usage of these technologies. Not only is the content shown through these technologies purported to be unbelievable but so are the technologies themselves. With these technologies, Ripley's is able to project a hologram of Robert Ripley who talks to the visitors and is made to look like he is actually moving objects in the room. They also have created a hologram of a ghost who looks like he is floating over the top of an urn and who

talks to visitors about Mr. Ripley's fascination with grave epithets. In a cemetery themed room at the Gatlinburg odditorium, Ripley's was able to make a stone bust appear as if he is alive and talking just like in the movie *Haunted Mansion*. Through calling attention to the interface then, the technologies are made to be their own spectacle.

## *2.5 Exhibiting the Human Other*

One of the most obvious entertainment forms that Ripley's draws upon are sideshows and similar attractions that presented people as culturally and physically Other. The beginning of Ripley's overlaps with the heyday of these attractions during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the United States and in the major cities of Europe (Bogdan 1988; Breitbart 1997; Chemers 2008; Trupp 2011). While differences exist between these attractions, my argument is not advanced by detailing each one individually. Instead, I focus on their commonality in the types of people who they exhibited, their techniques of showmanship, and reasons for display. Just as I attempt to remain neutral about the Othering practices of Ripley's, it is also not the purpose of this thesis to take a stance on the ethics of these historical displays because scholars have already presented an array of perspectives. However, in Chapter Seven, several ethical perspectives are presented as to acknowledge the importance of ethics.

Displayed persons were either born with the condition that relegated them to the status of the Other, or that status could be ascribed to them as a result of events later in life, whether that be from an accident or through their own purposeful actions. Commonly displayed were people who were born with genetic disorders and disabilities, who performed seemingly dangerous feats such as sword swallowing and firewalking, who

engaged in practices that were non-normative at the time such as tattooing, and who were considered non-Westerners, particularly indigenous groups (Bogdan 1988; Chemers 2008).

Gaffs were acts that were entirely staged, such as a person wearing a gorilla costume who was presented as the missing link, or a person who would hide his or her limbs under clothing in order to be presented as armless or legless (Bogdan 1988). A well-known gaff started by the showman P.T. Barnum and that Ripley's replicates in their odditoriums is that of the Fiji mermaid. Barnum presented a specimen that was the body of a fish sewn together with the head of a monkey. The mermaid was so carefully constructed that Barnum was able to fool scientists and the general public into believing it was legitimate. The mermaid exhibit remains one of Ripley's direct connections to the heyday of the sideshow.

To accentuate their differences, the people displayed were labeled as freaks, oddities, and curiosities to linguistically categorize them as completely Other than normal (Bogdan 1988). Bogdan (1988) says: "In the last quarter of the nineteenth century...all human exhibits, including tribal people of normal stature and body configuration, as well as people who performed unusual feats such as swallowing swords, fell under the generic term freak" (Bogdan 1988, 7). The shows in which people were displayed had various names including freak show, the congress of human wonders, odditoriums, sideshow, kid show, raree show, pitshow, ten in one, hall of human curiosities, and museum of nature's mistakes (Bogdan 1988, 3). Thus, Ripley's labeling of their museums as odditoriums directly stems to the naming practice of these earlier human displays.

A leading argument by scholars is that the people displayed were not naturally deviant, but rather, they were socially constructed as Other through a set of showmanship

practices and performances on the part of themselves and their managers (Bogdan 1998; Chemers 2008). Bogdan exemplifies the social construction of the freak in the story of Jack Earle who was so tall that he was asked by a sideshow manager to be presented to the public as a giant, like the giant known in fairy tales (Bogdan 1988, 3). Pamphlets were sold that fabricated or exaggerated details of the performers' lives in order to ensure that the public believed their marketed presentation. Bogdan argues that all acts of exhibition were performances that included some form of misrepresentation and that the people on display actively took part in their own misrepresentation (Bogdan 1988, 10).

Bogdan discusses two modes of presentation that were common in the sideshow. One mode is referred to as aggrandized presentation in which the displayed person's status was enhanced through a fake title or false characteristics (Bogdan 1988). One of the most popular examples of aggrandized presentation is the case of Charles Stratton. Stratton, who had dwarfism, joined Barnum's entertainment business at the age of five and was given the title of General Tom Thumb in order to heighten his fame. Labeling him as a general emphasized his unique nature and special status. Another mode is an exotic presentation in which the exhibited person's foreign origin, culture, and behavior were emphasized. As was the case in the earliest years of Ripley's, the technologies at the time limited the exposure that the general public had to foreign places which allowed for foreigners to be a mystery and hence more exciting (Bogdan 1988, 20 and 97).

Social Darwinism was a dominant ideology at the time that brought to the forefront discussions of race. Social Darwinism is the application of evolutionary laws to human populations and the ranking of people on a scale of most inferior to superior (Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc. 2014). The exhibitions served as places for the Euro-

American white public and scientists to ponder what defined being human and how the displayed people fit within the evolutionary hierarchy (Bogdan 1988; Chemers 2008; Breitbart 1997). Sideshows often drew directly upon the mainstream interest in evolution by presenting foreign performers as either the missing link or as closer to being an animal than human. Barnum once displayed an African American performer as an unidentified creature and labeled the exhibit: “What is it?” It was his hope that he could attract a huge crowd who was eager to decipher the mystery (Bogdan 1988, 138).

A technique that sideshows used to emphasize difference, and that Ripley’s has incorporated, was accentuation through props. For example, a person who was being exhibited for his or her extremely small height would sit in an oversized chair during the show. A performer who was overweight might wear clothes too small to draw attention to his or her body size (Bogdan 1988, 13). Moreover, the external material environment played a prominent role in attracting crowds and emphasizing difference. A common way that sideshows relegated their performers to seemingly non-human was to present them with animal-human nicknames or to depict them as part animal or other creature in banners that they would hang outside the sideshow entrances. Persons with ectrodactyly syndrome, that causes their hands to form in a way that resembles claws, were given nicknames like “lobster boy” and then literally drawn as a lobster on the sideshow banners (International Independent Showmen’s Museum 2014). To portray the performers as part human and part animal or other creature would peak the curiosity of passersby. An orator would further arouse curiosity by hosting a free mini-show with a few of the performers, promising the audience that more beings that they have never before witnessed were waiting for them inside. Showmen had to use special oratorical strategies and scripts to successfully create

a sense of wonder and to convince the public that they can truthfully view the deviant, the savage, and the totally strange (Bogdan 1988; Chemers 2008).

Other than serving to sate the curiosity of scientists and the public regarding human differences, theorists have noted that these spaces provided economically and socially for people who otherwise would have had difficulties finding careers or finding tolerant companions sympathetic to their conditions (Bogdan 1988; Chemers 2008; Fordham 2007). While a small number of shows that have the explicit goal of exhibiting Otherness still exist, the decline of such shows has been noted by scholars as occurring around the 1930s. Various theories have been proposed as to why these shows became less popular including: people with genetic disorders were not as mysterious as medical knowledge increased and as the public consequently wanted these people institutionalized in hospitals and asylums; caring for live people with special needs became more expensive than other forms of amusement; increased access to travel allowed more people to come into contact with other cultures which took away the mystery of non-Westerners; and there were increased debates about the ethics of displaying people with disabilities to the public (Bogdan 1988; Bogdan 1993; Chemers 2008).

Like sideshows, people who are in some way culturally or physically deviant from the mainstream U.S. have always been a major subject of Ripley's since its foundation. Ripley's still hopes to shock viewers with their content despite our more affordable travel and despite our technologies such as the internet and television that allows for regular exposure to people worldwide. At the Chicago World's Fair in 1933, Robert Ripley opened his first odditorium next to sideshow companies and displayed live performers. Mr. Ripley thought of his odditorium as more trustworthy than the Barnum sideshow because he



perceived Barnum as full of trickery due to his display of fake exhibits. Ripley claimed to never have deceived his audience. Ripley also reportedly disliked referring to his exhibits as freaks, which is perhaps another way that he distinguished his odditorium from other sideshow-like entertainment (Thompson 2013, 215-218). In the present day, Ripley's displays wax figures made in the likeness of people who were historically the main attractions at sideshows, and they still host occasional live sideshow performances at their odditoriums.

I asked Meyer if he thinks Ripley's is trying to maintain connections to sideshows and if so, how he thinks Ripley's compares to these attractions. Meyer responded:

“On the surface, yes...but the obvious big difference is we now show video and wax figures rather than real people. Robert Ripley liked the side shows and was clearly inspired by them and PT Barnum, but he never used the word ‘freaks’ when talking, and saw bringing the sideshow into Broadway theater (and world’s fairs) as legitimizing this form of entertainment for everyone. For good or bad, when we do special events today using live performers, yes we are trying to recreate a time, place, and feel associated with circuses--- and in turn FUN...” (Meyer May 2015)

## *2.6 Cabinets of Curiosities and the Modern Museum*

Meyer said that the first odditoriums were a direct descendent of the P.T. Barnum's museum in New York and the circus and sideshow genre, but the odditoriums became more reminiscent of the cabinet of curiosities with the establishment of the first odditorium in St. Augustine, Florida. From the Renaissance to the early 1800s, collectors assembled an assortment of skeletal remains, natural specimens, and artifacts in what has become referred to as cabinets of curiosities. The contents of cabinets of curiosities often were not labeled, contextualized with in-depth information, nor organized by chronology or type because the goal of displaying such collections was generally not to educate but rather to

display one's ability to afford the objects and the travel to obtain them (Ames 1992; Jenkins 1994). Hence, the cabinets of curiosities were often exhibits of prestige and wealth, but they also were meant to arouse intrigue and shock because the identification and background of some objects were not known by existing knowledge.

However, later in the 1800s, Jenkins (1994) states that collections no longer solely sated curiosity or to show off one's adventures, but they became scrutinized under a scientific "grid of rationality" that sought to categorize and hierarchize the world (Jenkins 1994, 245). Anthropology developed alongside the desire to classify specimens that were collected from exotic locales. Underlying the classifying agenda was the hope that one could be a detached observer who could visually observe how evolution materialized in the products of nature and societies. Formal museums developed as an intermediary space to connect the public to the knowledge of universities and scholars. Museums allowed anthropologists to prove their verbal and written descriptions of people through artifact displays. The empiricist tradition of ocularcentrism persists in museums as they rely largely on the ocular sense to "objectively prove" the physical aspects and cultural practices of people (Jenkins 1994, 242-270). While Ripley's does attempt to engage other senses (auditory and tactile), they do still largely rely on visuality in showcasing the Otherness of their exhibits.

Ripley's is founded on a similar collecting of eclectic human, animal, and natural objects from around the world. The odditoriums then and now are a reflection of Robert Ripley's global adventures. Like the historic cabinet of curiosities, Ripley's often displays a mix of their collections together with no regard to typology or chronology. Artifacts made several centuries ago might be displayed with objects produced within the last few years.

Religious ritual objects from New Guinea might be displayed with clothes from China, and human artifacts might be displayed with giant bird eggs and the skeletal remains of animals with genetic mutations. As in the case of cabinets of curiosities, Ripley's does not always provide in-depth informational panels on their exhibits; they might only provide a name.

Furthermore, Meyer told me that he prefers referring to Ripley's odditoriums as cabinets of curiosities and that he views them as reflecting his career at Ripley's and his travels (Meyer, interview, July 2015). Now that Meyer is the main employee in charge of collecting, he says the odditoriums have become a reflection of him and his collections (Meyer, interview, May 2015). He said: "...it has certainly been my goal to continually raise the bar for the Ripley collection which of course over time has evolved to some extent to be 'my collection' and a reflection of me (as well as him). I see myself as part showman, part preservationist of the glorious history of Robert Ripley and the company he founded" (Meyer, interview, May 2015).

With the development of the museum as an institution, it was standard that collections were organized in some way whether by type of artifact, place of origin, time of origin, or by the creator (Jenkins 1994, 248-270). While Ripley's draws upon the style of cabinets of curiosities, they also draw upon techniques of the formalized museum. Not all of their collections are displayed in the eclectic style of the cabinet of curiosities. Some of Ripley's collections are grouped by a common trait or presented in themed rooms. Objects from South American Amazonian communities might be displayed in a room that is decorated to look like the jungle. In my experience at the odditoriums, it was more common to find in-depth information panels on the objects as would be the case in most other museums.

From the 1840s with P.T. Barnum's purchase of Scudder's American Museum until the 1940s, to label a sideshow as a museum or to host sideshows in a museum setting became a common practice for trying to legitimize the display of living people. At Barnum's American Museum, live human exhibits were the most popular attraction among wax figures, taxidermy specimens, paintings, artifacts, and theatrical performances (American Social History Productions, Inc. 2002-2015). Ripley's odditoriums and P.T. Barnum's American Museum are similar in their attempt to offer both an educational and entertaining experience under the guise of a museum. Recall that Robert Ripley sought to make his odditoriums more legitimate and respectful of the people on display than the entertainment businesses of his peers at the time. Barnum also understood that a museum setting would legitimize his performers in the eyes of the public. Marketing the exhibition spaces as "museums" continued on into the early twentieth century and as in the case of Ripley's, took on such names as "odditoriums."

## *2.7 Conclusion*

The following chapters will further illustrate the techniques stemming from the sideshow and cabinets of curiosities that Ripley's uses to construct Otherness in their odditoriums. While borrowing techniques from the aforementioned historical attractions and staying true to Robert Ripley's original agenda of exhibiting the purported strangeness of our social and natural world, Ripley's remains current with present day technologies and audience demands in order to maintain their popularity.

## CHAPTER 3

### THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

#### *3.1 A Post-Structural Stance*

Until the post-structural shift in the 1960s, social scientists had sought to *discover* universal characteristics of humanity that were thought to objectively exist and to be awaiting the expertise of the researcher to uncover. Moreover, academics were maintaining the categories of their predecessors, and being unchallenged, these categories became taken for granted and treated as a seemingly natural way to think about the world. With post-structuralism and postmodernism, however, categories that have been relied upon for centuries were challenged and more broadly, so too was the formerly viewed objective reality of knowledge and the process of knowing (e.g. Butler 1991; Deleuze and Guattari 1980-2001; Derrida 1966). Within anthropology, it became necessary to reflect upon how one's identities and status as a culturally embedded actor impacted the research process and analysis of data. The discipline's established knowledge and categories were challenged as it was realized that we all take part in creating knowledge (e.g. Dumont 1991; Ellis 2004; Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995; Rosaldo 1993).

In this chapter, I contribute to the conversation of deconstructing knowledge and categories. I integrate the theories of leading post-structural and postmodern scholars to analyze the category of the human Other as presented by Ripley's. I frame my analysis

mainly through theories on categorization, the carnivalesque, the grotesque, the gaze, materiality, and space. While some of the concepts I apply, such as binary opposition, originated from structural scholars, I espouse a post-structural critique of them within the context of Ripley's. Underlying all of these theories is the dialectic view that people are agents in creating their social world but that the world we create is sequentially agentic in shaping our thoughts and behaviors often unknowingly through our established institutions and material creations.

### *3.2 Category Creation: Disability and the Savage Slot*

First, theories on how and why categories are constructed and what power relationships are involved in this process reveal how objects and people become labeled as Other (Douglas 1986; Fabian 2002; Foucault 1980; Trouillot 1991). Post-structural theories of discourse and categorization call attention to the manmade construction of our knowledge and that such knowledge is always socially and historically embedded (e.g. Butler 1991; Deleuze and Guattari 1980-2001; Derrida 1966; Weeks 1991). This means that society's notions of normative behavior is never static. It has and will continue to change. In the context of this research then, our ideas of normal bodies and cultural practices are changing. What at one point in time may have been perceived as a totally strange or inferior behavior might now be accepted as mainstream. Our increasing acceptance of tattoos is a prime example.

*Discourse* is an academic term that is similar in meaning to *category*. Foucault (1980) has defined discourse as a historically and socially specific body of knowledge that provides order and meaning of the world for social actors and that regulates and shapes behaviors and thoughts (Hall 1997b, 29). Discourse is created when particular

characteristics and behaviors of a person or thing are recognized and are legitimized as a body of knowledge. Rules are created that regulate subjects of discourse, and experts of a particular discourse are identified, allowing them to make truth claims about those subjects. (Hall 1997b, 29). Behaviors and traits only become objects of our knowledge when they are subjected to this discourse process. As an example, while people with notable physical differences have always existed, how they have been perceived and talked about has changed over the centuries and has varied by culture. Some cultures might categorize people with markedly different physical features as incarnations of their gods (ITV Studios Global Entertainment/Zig Zag Productions 2014). Thus, the discourse about these people is religious in nature, and they are treated with reverence.

However, in the United States, some physical differences have been categorized as a “disability.” The discourse of disability has entailed the idea that those people are less capable and that they should be treated like dependent children. Often too, people who are categorized as disabled have historically been treated as if they are without sexual and romantic desires or that they are not desired in those ways. They have been treated as a threat to the morality and evolutionary progress of society, as problems that ought to be institutionalized in asylums and hospitals, or as subjects to be displayed in sideshows (Fordham 2007; Majiet 1996; Thomson 1997). As discussed in the previous chapter, the result of this perception of disability is the creation of the discourse of freak and oddity, and this discourse is a way to linguistically mark the disabled as different from people with so-called normal physical traits. In the present day, the discourse that demarcates who can be regarded as freak has changed in some ways. For many people, to be labeled as a freak has more positive connotation than it did in earlier centuries because they take pride in

difference. Who is dubbed a freak has also expanded. The Venice Beach Freak Show in California has espoused the view that no one is normal and that we are all “freaks” in our own way but should embrace that diversity. In other words, we are all unique individuals and should be proud of our differences (AMC Network Entertainment 2013).

Due to the inclusion of non-Western people in amusement attractions including Ripley’s, the construction of Otherness as discussed by Trouillot (1991) reveals how the non-Westerner became an object of American discourse, particularly to the discipline of anthropology. Trouillot states that the identity of America and Europe as “the West” in contrast to all others as “the Rest” began with the writers and travelers from the Renaissance onward. During that time, people hoped to find a faraway utopia, but all they discovered were beings who were obstacles to that utopia. When Europe became Christendom, the demarcation of the West from the Rest was further accentuated under the efforts of colonization to save the Rest and make them more like the so-called enlightened European (Trouillot 1991, 17-44). Trouillot refers to the process of constructing non-Westerners as Other as the creation of the savage slot.

Fabian (2002) emphasizes the power of discursive practices, such as the language of time, in maintaining the savage slot within anthropology. Fabian states that sciences in the 18<sup>th</sup> century secularized and spatialized time through the division of history into epochs, and this burgeoned into spatializing time through typologies with sociocultural meaning. For instance, current academic disciplines still dichotomize time and the people of that time as preliterate vs. literate, urban vs. rural, and modern vs. primitive. Dichotomizing language is used to create a sense of distance between the academic and the subject of their study, and this distance allows for that subject to then become objectified under the



scholar's scientific gaze. Douglas (1986) has also indicated the power of language in the process of classification. Douglas illustrates how even sociologists like Durkheim and Weber, who thought of their examinations of society as being objective, could not escape utilizing institutional categories and dichotomies. Both Durkheim and Weber based their theories on the alleged division between the primitive and the modern (Douglas 1986, 91-109).

### *3.3 Binary Opposition, the Carnavalesque, and the Grotesque*

Trouillot and Fabian's theories have revealed the central role of binary oppositions in defining categories and discourse. Binary oppositions are categorically related pairs that are opposite in meaning such as light and dark, masculine and feminine, and beautiful and ugly. Prior scholars have theorized that binary oppositions are important in the process of categorization because in order to identify what something is, it has to be understood what it is not (Levi-Strauss 1977; Saussure 1906-1911). Sturken and Cartwright state (2001): "...binary oppositions are reductive ways of viewing the complexity of difference, and as philosopher Jacques Derrida has argued, all binary oppositions are encoded with values and concepts of power, superiority, and worth" (Sturken and Cartwright 2001, 104). Thus, in any given pair of binary opposites, one of the categories is always considered to be the norm whereas the second category is the Other. Sturken and Cartwright exemplify binary opposition in their discussion of how the Euro-American male created the category of the Orient as an entity that contains opposing and negative qualities from that of the West. In Western historical scholarship, the West has been regarded as the norm and is identified through its opposite, the Orient (Sturken and Cartwright 2001; Said 1978).

A major discussion in this thesis regards how Ripley's uses decorative elements to confront visitors with binary oppositions that are then pertinent to the process of constructing Otherness. However, taking a post-structural stance, binary oppositions at Ripley's are not closed structures. The boundary between opposites is blurred in their odditoriums as their subjects of display and their visitors regularly change statuses, allowing ambiguity to flourish.

Bakhtin's (1984) discussion of the carnivalesque and grotesque aids in understanding this ambiguity and fluidity of categories. Bakhtin's conception of the carnivalesque stems to his analysis of the carnival in Europe during the Medieval and Renaissance eras. Unlike 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century sideshows that clearly delineated persons who were deviant from members of the public were considered socially and physically superior, carnivals as discussed by Bakhtin were moments in which all participants were treated as equal. Unlike the later sideshows, everyone was made into a spectacle during carnival time. Humor played an important role in creating an atmosphere of equality as everyone laughed and was laughed at regardless of their positions outside of carnival time. Carnival was a time for social inversion and loosened regulations; everyone was able to be the satirically crude and dirty, and the boundaries of hierarchal statuses were erased. Similarly, at Ripley's, the boundary between those who look and those who are looked at is frequently switching. In one moment of the odditorium visit, the Otherness of the exhibits are highlighted, whereas at other times, the visitors are turned into the spectacle wherein their own Otherness is brought to the forefront.

Making a spectacle out of the grotesque was part of disrupting boundaries during carnival. Dating to the 15<sup>th</sup> century in Italy, anything or anyone that disrupts categorical

boundaries is referred to as “grotesque” (Bakhtin 1984; Edwards and Graulund 2013; Perttula 2011). The term grotesque specifically dates to the discovery of Emperor Nero’s palace in Rome during the 1480s. The palace was found decorated with imagery that was a hybrid of geometrical shapes with animal, human, and vegetable figuration. Such hybridity is a prime characteristic of the grotesque. Usually, the hybrid images defy any known being or thing in the world and hence upsets our notions of the natural order. Bearded ladies, who display characteristics thought to be natural to males and females, have been a common figure in the entertainment of the purported grotesque, like in the sideshow. Other than hybridity, grotesque figures can be characterized as having some type of physical deviation from what is thought to be natural, such as either lacking or having excessive body parts (Perttula 2011). For this reason, persons with dwarfism, gigantism, and who have excessive arms and legs have also been commonly portrayed as grotesque figures.

Finally, natural processes and parts of the body can be construed as grotesque when emphasized. Depicting flatulence, urination, defecation, death, and sex guides viewers to dwell on those aspects of the body that are thought to be “seen in the cultural hierarchy as a lower, material stratum” (Perttula 2011, 34). Furthermore, Perttula (2011) states: “...the grotesque breaches orders, hierarchies, and separations also in other areas of decorum. It demeans the ‘high’ and elevates the ‘low’ and by doing so questions the hierarchical social order” (Perttula 2011, 26).

In the fashion of binary oppositions, scholars propose that we only come to understand and label something as grotesque through having knowledge of who or what is considered to be natural. We are curious about and attracted to these figures that challenge

who and what we know to exist. Grotesque figures have been popular in art, literature, and film as they arouse a mixture of fear, laughter, confusion, and revulsion (Edwards and Graulund 2013; Perttula 2011). In an examination of food taboos in the bible, Douglas (1999) argues that something is relegated to the category of the impure and of the taboo when there is uncertainty regarding how to otherwise categorize that thing. Things labeled as impure or taboo often have characteristics of multiple categories, like in the case of the grotesque (Douglas 1999). Consequently, since impure and taboo things inspire feelings of disgust, it is no wonder that grotesque things often have this effect as well.

As I will discuss throughout the thesis, Ripley's plays on various forms of the grotesque by calling attention to hybridity and ambiguity, bodily excess and deficiency, and biological processes. Ripley's entertainment hinges upon other types of categorical disruptions and ambiguity, such playing on the border of fact and fiction.

### *3.4 Institutional Power and Scientific Authority*

Society's most powerful institutions are theorized as leading in discourse creation, and due to their power, they highly influence the public to adopt their categorization often unknowingly through dominant visual representations in popular media (Hall 1997a/b; Mbodj 2002; Solometo and Moss 2013; Sturken and Cartwright 2001; Wallis 1996). As people consume media representations, they are interpreting meaningful messages. The creator's message is more likely to be accepted if produced in representations from sources that are perceived as scientific or authoritative such as maps, ethnographic photographs, science journals, museums, or well-renowned educational magazines (Lutz and Collins 1993; Mbodj 2002; Solometo and Moss 2013; Sturken and Cartwright 2001; Wallis 1996).

For instance, Mbodj (2002) reveals that map-making is a technology of power that produces and subtly disseminates knowledge of the Other. Mbodj illustrates how the subjective reality of the map but the perception of it as objective causes it to be a subliminal power. During European colonialism, cartographers would depict European countries as smaller than their colonized lands to advertise their ability to overcome these “huge” territories. Along with issues of size accuracy, the former Mercator projections presented distance and location in a manner that made Africa appear as if it was “crouching at European feet” (Mbodj 2002, 53). Mbodj uses these examples to show the eurocentrism of the map; this eurocentrism is not realized because through the use of math in map construction, map-making is thought to be reflective of objective reality. Cultures, ethnic groups, and polities are still defined by their boundaries in space that subsequently has political and economic implications, such as issues of accessibility to resources. The map is a teacher with disguised lesson plans as it can insidiously perpetuate the ideologies of dominance and inferiority when introduced (Mbodj 2002, 37-58).

In a study of how *National Geographic* has represented prehistoric gender between 1907 and 2007, Solometo and Moss (2013) discovered that artists and archaeologists were projecting their dichotomizing notions of gender and gender roles onto the past. Women were presented as passive; they were depicted as only involved in domestic activities and childrearing. However, men were depicted as partaking in active roles like hunting, fighting, negotiating, and building. Solometo and Moss concluded that men then become associated as the bringers of human progress and civilization (Solometo and Moss 2013, 123-146). Not only does their study reinforce Douglas’s conclusion that even academicians are not immune from utilizing society’s categorization, but because *National Geographic*

is a well-renowned magazine thought to be educational, its readers might be more unlikely to question what is presented to them. Since Ripley's odditoriums are marketed as museums, they might be perceived as educationally authoritative, and their representations of people may be accepted as objective.

Scientific authority has played a key role in the exhibition and construction of the human Other. In 1810, Saartje Bartman, a young Khoikhoi woman, was taken from her home in Africa to be publicly displayed in London. In trying to understand her ethnicity and black female sexuality, scientists displayed and meticulously scrutinized parts of her body that were perceived as deviant from the white female body. Georges Cuvier, who was the primary investigator, stated that her buttocks and elongated apron (labia minora) were signs that she actually belonged to the Bushmen group. To label her as a "Bushman," Cuvier relegated her to being absolute primitive as he believed Bushmen were biologically the most similar to monkeys. After her death in 1816, her brain and sexual organs were displayed in a museum in Paris until the 1980s (Fausto-Sterling 1995, 20-48). By continuously displaying these parts of her body in a museum space, the discourse of the abnormal body was perpetually instilled in the public as the exhibition beckoned visitors to gawk and ponder the meaning and difference of the body parts.

### *3.5 Agency of the Material and Immaterial World*

Central to my analysis is the theory that objects and the built environment are agentic in that they do not simply reflect culture, but they also constitute culture and our interactions with and ideas of the social world. In this research, perceptions of Otherness are extended to broader social contexts like bodies, sexuality, religion, and ritual in which

an exhibited object might be associated (Beaudry et al. 1991; Buckli 2004; Dobres 2010; Fahlander 2005; Gosden 2005; Hurcombe 2007; Kopytoff 1986; Miller 2010).

In their theories of the frame, Goffman (1974) and Gombrich (1979) propose that our material world influences how we categorize and think about aspects of social life, and it cues people on appropriate behavior. Gombrich, for example, discusses that the art museum shapes the way that we categorize and think about an object. When a work is displayed within the frame of an *art* museum, we come to think of that work as not only art but typically one of value that is worth the money to be seen (Goffman 1974; Gombrich 1979; Miller 2010). Based off of Goffman and Gombrich's frame theories, Miller (2010) proposes his theory on the humility of things. According to this theory, material settings that we encounter in our everyday lives are the most powerful in shaping our behavior because we are no longer consciously thinking about and critiquing them. Theatrical plays, for instance, are a common activity in American popular culture. As a result, Miller states that violence enacted on stage during a play will be understood as pretend and the viewers will not react as they would if they saw the same violence enacted on a city street. The built environment of the theater has shaped us to behave in a way that we accept and generally do not question (Miller 2010, 50). Theories of the frame and the humility of things help understand how the arrangement and decoration of exhibits at Ripley's shapes our conception of the exhibit as Other.

Moreover, Miller discusses the role of immateriality in shaping our behaviors within an environment. Facets of the environment that we cannot visually see but can perceive, such as age, history, and value, might impact the way that we behave or treat material things within a space (Miller 2010, 110-134). Ripley's relies just as much on the

immaterial as they do the material in guiding their visitors' to particular interpretations and experiences. For instance, calling attention to ghosts, that I will discuss in Chapter Four, is an immaterial aspect that Ripley's draws heavily upon to create the perception that their odditoriums are odd.

Representations of people are displayed within Ripley's, and therefore objectification theory informs how people become gazed upon like objects. Miller's (2010) theory of objectification synthesizes philosophies from Hegel and Marx. Hegel and Marx discussed self-alienation, the former regarding consciousness and the later concerning the capitalistic mode of production (Miller 2010, 42-68). Both Hegel and Marx state that the process of self-alienation results in false consciousness, the unawareness of objects as human-made. Objects seem to take a life of their own and reproduce themselves. Additionally, their lives can lead to unintended and oppressive consequences as is the case of cars and pollution (Miller 2010, 59).

Miller adopts the idea of self-alienation and further theorizes objectification as a blur between the boundary of subject and object because he more broadly theorizes objects as having agency (objects as constituting people). Miller acknowledges that objectification has been theorized by feminists and sociologists as simply treating and seeing people as objects, but he critiques this view as it then relegates objects again to having no agency and at the mercy of human use (Miller 2010). Objects at Ripley's are not only constituted as odd, but they constitute the people that they represent in the same fashion. From this, the objects take a life of their own and narrate the bodies and cultural practices of those people.



### *3.6 The Gaze, the Reverse Gaze, and Panopticism*

In the history of science, museums, and entertainment, the sense of sight has generally been privileged. This ocularcentrism has influenced social and philosophical theories to focus on how people visually perceive and interact with the world. The concept of the gaze has been applied to the process of viewing and interpreting (Foucault 1980, 146-164). As used by social and media theorists, “to gaze” implies being in a position of power, one in which the viewer can scrutinize and judge the identity and body of the subject under the viewer’s ocular surveillance. Categories are reinforced or challenged through this act of gazing (Bakhtin 1984; Crossley 1993; Fanon 1967; Foucault 1980; Gillespie 2006; Sturken and Cartwright 2001; Urry and Larsen 2011).

In an examination of the gaze, Crossley (1993) bridges Sartre’s notion of the look with Foucault’s theory of Panopticism. As summarized by Crossley, Sartre theorized that “‘the look’ is to experience oneself as no longer belonging to oneself but as belonging as an object in the project of the other” (Crossley 1993, 408). Sartre theorized the look as an alienating and objectifying act, but Crossley contends that Sartre treats the look’s effect as the result of natural human relations. Foucault, however, theorizes the gaze as a product of intentions on the part of powerful social actors. While Sartre specifies why people react as they do to the gaze, Foucault specifies a particular mechanism of surveillance that is more accepted by Crossley (Crossley 1993).

Applying Jeremy Bentham’s conception of the Panopticon prison, Foucault (1980) argues that people subject themselves to power by self-regulation because mechanisms in modern society cause us to think that we are under constant surveillance. For example, Foucault says that contemporary architecture functions similarly to the Panopticon design,

which was a hypothetical prison that arranged prisoner cells around a central watchtower. Windows within the cells allowed in outside light that ensured prisoners stayed visible to the surveyor in the watchtower, but the windows on the watchtower prevented the surveyor from being seen. Foucault says that prisoners would thus regulate their behavior due to the assumption that they were always being watched. Yet, even watchtower inhabitants were not safe from surveillance as outside powers visit prisons to survey management. The ultimate surveyor is not known and power remains invisible and hence insidious (Crossley 1993; Foucault 1980). The integration of Crossley, Sartre, and Foucault's theories indicate that the gaze is a powerful effect that is imparted through materiality, such as the arrangement of space (Crossley 1993; Foucault 1980).

Since the entertainment of Ripley's involves their audience gazing at people and objects, Crossley's synthesized philosophy of the gaze is applied to my research. As theorized by Sartre, I examine how the gaze is central to the process of objectification and subsequently how objectification is one part of what constructs Ripley's exhibits as Other. Panopticism contributes to thinking about the mechanisms in which the gaze is enforced, such as through the arrangement of space (Crossley 1993; Foucault 1980).

Gillespie's (2006) work on the reverse gaze sheds light on how the extensive use of mirrors in the auditoriums might function as tools of reflexivity back upon oneself. Gillespie proposes that subjects of the tourist photograph can exert a powerful reverse gaze that affects the behavior of the photographer. Gillespie's fieldwork among the Ladakhi of northern India offers evidence for the reverse gaze. While attending a cultural festival in which traditional Ladakhi were on display for Western tourists, Gillespie noticed a Ladakhi woman was the center of attention because her appearance and dress met expectations more

than others of what a traditional Ladakhi looks like. One tourist, without the Ladakhi woman's permission, persistently took pictures of her until she started taking pictures of that tourist in return. Her reverse photography caught the attention of the crowd who also turned their gaze upon the tourist. Gillespie states that this seemed to cause discomfort in the tourist as he then left the festival. The discomfort of the reverse gaze was additionally witnessed through the ways that tourists would take photographs; they would pretend to be photographing the landscape when they were actually taking pictures of the Ladakhi or they would take a picture quickly without looking through the lens (Gillespie 2006, 343-366).

Gillespie states that being caught in the act of gazing by the Ladakhi caused the sense of a spoiled tourist identity. Tourists wanted to avoid the negative perception of themselves as just another superficial tourist who took pictures of the Ladakhi without regard to their feelings. Tourists wanted to avoid being perceived as colonialist, ignorant, and intrusive. Connected to these perceived stereotypes are notions of the authentic traveler and inauthentic tourist. An authentic traveler takes the time to experience the culture on a deeper level than an inauthentic tourist who takes photos just to document that they were at those locations. The reverse gaze causes discomfort because it upsets the idealized traveler self and makes them aware of a supposedly inauthentic and disrespectful tourist self. Gillespie discovered though that overall, the Ladakhis felt valued and proud when photographed as opposed to disrespected or objectified, and hence, the tourists were subjecting themselves to their perceptions of how the Ladakhi feel about tourists and photography. As a result, Gillespie argues that tourists are assuming that their ideas of tourists are also the perspective of the Ladakhis (Gillespie 2006, 343-366).

The concept of the reverse gaze reveals how verbal summons and decorative elements at Ripley's might provoke the audience to engage with their perceptions of the people and objects that they are viewing and of their identity as consumers of Ripley's media. My main question regarding this is: how does the reverse gaze reinforce or challenge the exhibits as Other? Theories of binary opposition tie into this question as well because by instigating reflexivity in the audience, they are thinking about who they are in comparison to who or what the people and objects are, allowing for the categorization of the Other to exist (Sturken and Cartwright 2001).

### *3.7 The Process of Interpretation and the Public's Agency*

The intended message of representation is not always interpreted, thus adding complexity to the interpretation process (Fiske 2001; Jenkins 2006; Sturken and Cartwright 2001; Wells et al 1999). In a discussion of intertextuality, Fiske (2001) recognizes the agency of individuals in the process of interpretation. Intertextuality occurs when the meaning of a text is produced from a combination of gossip, social experience, reviews of a work, knowledge of other texts, and cultural categories such as genre. He argues that while producers of a text try to guide a particular interpretation through labeling that text's genre or through publicizing intended meanings, viewers often impose their own meanings. As an example, even though a film might be categorized in the action genre by the producers, some viewers might focus more on the romance of the film (Fiske 2001, 219-223). Fiske does not discuss in detail how our experiences can influence how we interpret a text, but Medhurst (1991) exemplifies this process in his gay reading of Batman. Medhurst identifies himself as a gay man in order to make it clear to his readers why he has chosen to focus on gay interpretations of Batman (Medhurst 1991, 149).

Fiske also says that interpretations are influenced by fan gossip and reviews of a text. Readers or viewers of a text are swayed to think a certain way about that text through the words of other audience members (Fiske 2001, 230-232). Similarly, Jenkins' (2006) discusses the agency of viewers through an analysis of online fan forums and fan fiction. Jenkins talks of the cooperation between media producers and consumers in influencing content (Jenkins 2006, 2-3). Like Fiske, Jenkins recognizes the active participation of the audience in changing texts. To illustrate, Jenkins says that producers for the show *Survivor* would browse fan forums and write scripts for the show based on what fans speculated or hoped would happen (Jenkins 2006, 46). Additionally, fan fiction is the agentic process of fans bringing to life the meanings that they want from content.

In Chapter Five, I discuss how viewers of Ripley's have asserted their agency through their demands and commentary regarding the wax figure of Grace McDaniels and the fertility statues. Overall, Ripley's has always depended on the public for providing their content. Ripley's encourages the public to submit any information that they think is fitting for their odditoriums and media, and they rely on the compliance of people to be photographed, to be video recorded, and to pose for the creation of wax figures. Likewise, Ripley's buys a significant portion of their collection from the public in events called "bizarre buying bazaars."

There have been responses by the public and by people on display in amusement attractions that counter the societal acceptance of the representations that are presented (Wells et al. 1999; Bogdan 1988). Hence, while in this phase of research I am largely focused on how the power of Ripley's as an institution constructs Otherness, I recognize the power of the individual and their experiences of interpreting and responding to the

messages of representation. This research sets the stage for a future project that extensively examines how consumers of Ripley's are reacting to these representations.

### *3.8 Methodology and Positionality*

A majority of my fieldwork extended from May to August of 2015, but I conducted preliminary research in March 2015. During my preliminary research, I visited the odditorium in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina so that I could gain an initial understanding of the literature and theories that would be helpful for my work and the questions that would be pertinent to ask. Overall, I examined the various Ripley's media including their books, radio and television shows, YouTube videos, Facebook page, official website and attraction websites, and their daily newspaper cartoons.

Because Ripley's has been publishing books since the time of Robert Ripley, I was unable to find and examine all books published. Rather I chose only eight books to gain a surface-level understanding of what Ripley's presents as odd and how they do so in a written and photographically-based media form. Two of the books that I analyzed were collections of past Ripley's newspaper cartoons whereas the other books showed photographs of Ripley's exhibits from the early 2000s to the present.

Like books, Ripley's has produced a lot of shows since Rob Ripley. I have watched fifteen minute long television shorts that were hosted by Rob Ripley in the 1930s, animated cartoons that were intended for children, and eight episodes of the Ripley's show hosted by Jack Palance in the 1980s. Ripley's also aired a show in the early 2000s hosted by Dean Cain that I have seen brief video clips of. I have listened to about thirty of their radio shows that broadcasted from 2009 to 2015 but that are still available online. The radio programs helped me understand how Ripley's presents their exhibits as odd solely through verbal

form; it gave insight into the language that is used to construct Otherness. Only the Ripley's comics from December of 1996 to the present can be found online. I analyzed the comics on a three-year interval, starting in 1997 and ending in 2015. Furthermore, commentary on Ripley's Facebook page and on YouTube videos offered insight into how the general public talks about and reacts to Ripley's exhibits.

During the initial stages of this research, I envisioned discussing my analysis of the comics, books, television shows, podcasts, and social media pages, but I decided that such in-depth analysis of all the media forms would extend beyond the scope of this thesis. By focusing on the odditoriums, I was able to observe people's interactions with exhibits firsthand, and I was able to experience the museums myself and photograph the exhibits. Since each Ripley's odditorium houses a unique collection, I wanted to visit several of the museums in order to gain a comparative dataset. I visited Ripley's odditoriums in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina; Orlando, Florida; St. Augustine, Florida; and Gatlinburg, Tennessee. Because of close proximity to my home, I designated Myrtle Beach as the odditorium to do longer-term research so that I could document changes that occur in the museums. I visited the Myrtle Beach odditorium once in March and in July of 2015. All other odditoriums have only been visited once.

Since it is permitted, I took pictures and video inside the odditoriums to document the modes of display and the decoration and arrangement of space. For my spatial analysis, I initially wanted to create a map of at least one odditorium. My plan was to dedicate one visit solely to the goal of sketching the odditorium layout from my perspective to enable my readers to view how a visitor to an odditorium might experience the space. However, due to the often highly crowded rooms and limited spaces to sit down and draw, this task

was not feasible for the time I had. Although I did not create a visual map, I was able to re-create my walkthroughs of the odditorium from my pictures, videos, and written notes. After I visited an odditorium, I would take the time to write a detailed description of the order of the rooms, of the rooms' decoration and layout, of the exhibits and other content in the rooms, of my personal experiences and feelings in the rooms, and of my observations regarding visitor interactions with the exhibits and the route that they took through the rooms (Powell 2010). I particularly paid attention to the rooms' themes and types of exhibits to ascertain whether Ripley's was sequencing the rooms in a noticeable way. As an example, I wanted to know whether Ripley's was displaying the oldest artifacts before the youngest or was displaying artifacts from certain countries before others. It was my hope that by examining spatial order, I could determine if Ripley's was trying to guide our interpretation of the exhibits through the sequence of their display. Overall, theories of the frame and of the humility of things guide my spatial analysis.

I created an inventory list of the decorative themes and artifact types for each odditorium to help organize my written descriptions and to help gauge the similarities and differences between each odditorium so that I could better understand who and what is commonly presented by Ripley's. A content analysis of Ripley's social media, television programs, tourist informational booklets, cartoons, book, and websites was undertaken throughout the entire research process. Content analysis included tabulating the types of artifacts and people displayed in order to ascertain frequency and what might be considered Ripley's icons.

In order to understand experiences with and reactions to Ripley's, I disseminated surveys and interviewed both viewers and employees of Ripley's. I have twice interviewed



Edward Meyer who has been Ripley's archivist for over thirty-seven years and is the main person in charge of acquiring the artifacts and deciding what goes into the odditoriums. I also talked to Kim Kiff, the manager of the St. Augustine odditorium. Receiving other employee feedback was important because one of the problems that I encountered while talking to Ed Meyer is that he does not consider all of what Ripley's displays as being "oddities" and only applies that word to certain exhibits such as human or animal bodies. Otherwise he just refers to what is displayed as Believe It or Nots!, artifacts, or works of art. I had initially imposed the term oddities too much on my research, and therefore in my interviews with Kiff and Ripley's viewers, I allowed for them to tell me how they would best label Ripley's exhibits. Many interviewees chose "artifacts" like Ed Meyer whereas others thought "oddities" was the best sum of their exhibits. Even though I still directly asked about the usage of the word oddity, I allowed for more open-ended discussion of other words people use to label Ripley's exhibits.

Through snowball sampling, I interviewed five people who have visited the odditoriums or viewed Ripley's media. They were asked about how they would label and describe Ripley's exhibits, what they thought an oddity was, and how they thought Ripley's was able to present their exhibits as out-of-the-ordinary. From August 2015 to January 2016, two surveys were posted online through Google. Friends helped disseminate the surveys by posting the links to their Facebook pages. One of the surveys asked thirteen, primarily open-ended questions about people's experiences with Ripley's odditoriums and media, and the other survey showed twenty-five pictures of Ripley's exhibits in which I ask the survey taker to rank the pictures on whether they disagree or agree that the photos show oddities. In all, I collected thirty-six survey responses. Additionally, I read reviews

of the odditoriums, read blogs in which people narrated their experiences at the odditoriums, and I watched YouTube videos that were posted of people's visits to the odditoriums.

The research for this thesis had been approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of South Carolina, Columbia. I did not encounter ethical dilemmas while in the field, but I have carefully considered how to write about the Othering practices of Ripley's. Considering that the full scope of this research would not have been possible without the time and assistance of several Ripley's employees, I questioned how I could write about a topic that scholars historically have used as a critique of culture without sounding like an attack on Ripley's. I have reconciled this uncertainty by attempting to talk about what Ripley's is doing in a neutral way in which I do not claim that their exhibitions of people are ethically wrong. To reiterate, just from my brief research, I have discovered that viewers have interpreted Ripley's presentations of Otherness in a variety of ways, and not all are negative. The Ripley's employees who I interviewed said that the intention of their brand is to highlight difference out of appreciation and intrigue of that diversity.

I agree with the postmodern stance that no anthropological data is wholly objective; all data is filtered through our past experiences, our emotions, and the challenges that we face in fieldwork (Dumont 1991; Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995; Rosaldo 1993). Carolyn Ellis (2004) writes: "...it's self-absorbed to pretend that you are somehow outside of what you study and not impacted by the same forces as others. It's self-absorbed to mistakenly think that your actions and relationships need no reflexive thought...(Ellis 2004:34). Since a significant portion of my data is based on my own experiences with the exhibits and reactions to them, it is important to be explicit about my identity and the biases that have

likely impacted how I think about these exhibits compared to other viewers of Ripley's. As I discussed, Medhurst was inclined to focus on gay interpretations of Batman due to his sexual identification as a gay man (Medhurst 1991). Similarly in trying to understand why I have been drawn to interpret Ripley's through theories of Othering, I have reflected on my past with anorexia in which I experienced the feeling of Otherness. Scholars with different experiences than me might be attracted to other theories that will influence the way they interpret Ripley's. My experiences with an eating disorder has also shaped the focus of this research to be on representations of bodies.

Moreover, I identify as a heterosexual, white female who was born in the United States. I have not been diagnosed with any condition that might be considered as a disability within the U.S. This latter point is especially significant as many of the body exhibits at Ripley's are people who would be labeled as a member of the disability category. Perhaps a viewer who might self-identify or be externally subjected to the disabled label would respond differently to Ripley's exhibits. Finally, my graduate program trains us in the four fields of anthropology regardless of specialization. Therefore, my committee has stressed that I utilize theories from each subfield within this research. In particular, I have been heavily trained in post-structural theory and thus directed to think about the world from this standpoint.

## CHAPTER 4

### MATERIALITY, SPACE, AND LANGUAGE

#### *4.1 Introduction*

In this chapter, I discuss how Otherness is constructed through the materiality, space, and language of Ripley's odditoriums and exhibits. I first examine the role of advertisements and of the exterior and interior decoration of the odditorium space in creating the perception that the exhibits inside are odd and Other. Through advertisements and exterior decoration, visitors are shaped to perceive the exhibits as Other before even entering the odditorium. The interior decoration is important for maintaining the odditorium space as an environment of the Other. Next, I analyze the decoration, arrangement, and language of specific exhibits. While most of my analysis is based on my in-person visits to four of Ripley's odditoriums, I have also watched YouTube videos of other visitors' walkthroughs of the company's odditoriums across the world. My impression is that the global odditoriums have similar exhibits, decorations, and odditorium layouts as the ones located in the United States.

Theories of the frame and of the humility of things mainly guide this chapter's analysis. These theories espouse that objects should be viewed as having a form of agency in that they can shape our actions and our ideas of the social world (Goffman 1974; Gombrich 1979; Miller 2010). I argue that exhibits play an important role in Ripley's

odditoriums for shaping our ideas of Otherness; they are part of constructing and communicating the message that certain cultures and bodies are Other. Because the artifacts of Ripley's range from being a form of expressive culture to playing a role in religion, sexuality, warfare, leisure, body modification, politics, and economies, visitors extrapolate what Ripley's says of the artifacts and form ideas of the larger social practice that the artifact is associated with. Just as it can be a problem in archaeological work, often we only gain a very narrow wormhole view of a culture through the object and may not receive the full complexity of what is going on. By focusing only on the supposed extreme differences of other people, we might fail to see our commonalities with them, and as a result, the Otherness of people is able to be conveyed.

#### *4.2 Advertisements*

Ripley's intention of presenting strangeness and Otherness is first evident through continually referring to their museums as odditoriums and their exhibits as oddities. As I discussed in Chapter One, the root morpheme of *odd* in odditoriums and oddities emphasizes the museum space and objects inside as strange. Just like labeling something as *art* shapes us to perceive that object as having a certain meaning and significance (Goffman 1974; Gombrich 1979; Miller 2010), framing an object as an *oddity* or as belonging to an *odditorium* guides us to interpret the object as something that is uncanny. Recall Fiske's discussion of how producers label a media's genre (e.g. action, horror, romance, comedy) as a means to assert their intended interpretation (Fiske 2001). The category of odditorium seems to function like a genre here; by Ripley's labeling their museums and exhibits as part of the odditorium genre, the company is attempting to control our reading of their displays.

Next, Ripley's agenda is apparent through the language of their advertising. One notable advertisement of the Gatlinburg odditorium that was posted on a tourism website and that prepares visitors to think of the exhibits inside Ripley's as strange says: "Visit the Strangest Place in Gatlinburg! Experience the Odd & Weird World of Ripley, where 'Truth is Stranger than Fiction'..." (Gatlinburg Convention and Visitors Bureau 2016). Another online advertisement for Gatlinburg says: "Yes, the Smoky Mountains area reminds you of all that is wonderful in the natural world. But once you step inside Ripley's Believe It or Not Odditorium, you'll witness some of the most unnatural things around...and they're all real!" (Cabins of the Smoky Mountains 2016). The advertisement's description that the exhibits of Ripley's are unnatural can be understood through the theoretical discussion of the grotesque. Before entering the odditorium, an advertisement such as the one above shapes visitors to expect completely alien things and beings that defy their established knowledge and logic.

An online advertisement for the Orlando odditorium says:

"For over 40 years, Robert Ripley—the modern Marco Polo and the real-life Indiana Jones—traveled the world collecting the unbelievable, the inexplicable, the one-of-a-kind...Each museum's collection is 90% unique and different...Ripley's Believe It or Not! Museums are proud to offer you this fantastic collection of the world's strangest oddities" (Palm Pavilion Inn 2016).

In this advertisement, Robert Ripley is described as similar to adventurous figures whose work and travel have been popularly depicted by the media as risky yet heroic and exciting. Adventurers have commonly been depicted as heroic because they were perceived as risking their lives in their encounters with unknown people in territories never before explored by their homeland. It was my interpretation that through depicting Mr. Ripley as

an adventurer like Marco Polo and Indiana Jones, the writers of the advertisement wanted to conjure the notion that Ripley took a risk to collect these objects. In a time when not everyone could afford travel, it may have seemed heroic that Mr. Ripley took it upon himself to encounter foreign lands and people to bring worldly treasures and knowledge.

Another Orlando advertisement comments upon the exterior as attracting visitors to the odditorium:

“The first thrill at Ripley’s Believe It or Not! Museum begins in the parking lot. As visitors walk toward the front door, they are greeted with the seemingly precarious sight of a building that slopes into the ground. The illusion is all for show, but the wide-eyed stares continue once guests enter the museum...Seeing is believing, and the museum remains open 365 days a year, encouraging patrons to experience a small sampling of the world’s most bizarre relics and stories” (Groupon, Inc. 2016).

This advertisement promises that visitors will be able to experience the odd before even entering the museum space, and it reiterates the importance of witnessing with one’s own eyes as a form of truth validation. Later in the chapter, I will provide other specific examples of how Ripley’s and sideshows play on ocularcentrism, that one has to see in order to know the truth. Also, from this advertisement’s declaration that the first thrill starts in the parking lot, it becomes clear that the odditoriums’ exterior facades are purposefully commodified into Believe It or Nots! as well. The buildings themselves are a form of advertising to attract tourists.

In the previous two advertisements, Ripley’s blurs the line between fact and fiction. Ripley’s appropriates the image of the fictional Indiana Jones, whose representation in the media serves to sensationalize archaeology, and they play upon the image of Marco Polo, who was a real historical figure. In the second advertisement, Ripley’ promotes their

fictionalized space; while the building is not truly falling into a sinkhole, they are able to create a convincing appearance that it is. It becomes even more convincing because Florida, where the Orlando odditorium is stationed, is known for being prone to sinkholes wherein buildings fall into (USGS Water Science School 2016). The blur of real and fake occurs in the hypermediation and immediacy of the space as well (Bolter and Grusin 2000). On one hand, Ripley's is using their fictionalized landscapes to try and create a feeling of immediacy in their visitors, that they are in a world other than an odditorium in the middle of a tourist town. Conversely, the hypermediation of the space via the bombardment of various technologies often disrupts the immediacy. It is difficult, for example, to truly feel like one is exploring a prehistoric cave when there are televisions. This play with the boundary of fact and fiction appears as part of Ripley's strategy to entice visitors to come to their odditoriums due to the possibility that their ideas of what is real or fake may be upturned. This blur of fact and fiction is also a spectacle of ambiguity, and ambiguity has been a key characteristic of figures regarded as grotesque, impure, taboo, or as a freak.

In addition to online advertisements, I found brochure advertisements at local hotels, restaurants, visitor centers, and in the lobby of the odditoriums. In a brochure for the Myrtle Beach odditorium, the caption reads: "Ripley's Believe It or Not! odditorium is a unique experience, where you will find things so extraordinary, so shocking, you'll wonder how they could possibly be true! Marvel at our collection of weird and unusual exhibits and rare treasures as you explore some of the weirdest finds imaginable" (Ripley Entertainment Inc. 2016c). Here, it is clear that Ripley's is trying to guide the reader to interpret the exhibits as so strange that they are unbelievable and shocking. The viewer has to be ready to witness "some of the weirdest finds imaginable."



Finally, in a brochure for the Orlando odditorium, the advertisement reads: “Explore our vast, eclectic collection and hands-on exhibits in the unusual building that’s disappearing into a sinkhole” (Ripley Entertainment Inc. 2016d). It is interesting that the wording of the text does not say that Ripley’s *appears* to be disappearing into a sinkhole but that it actually *is*. This kind of matter-of-fact language moves viewers beyond simple appearances in order to really make them feel transported into another world. As another example of this matter-of-fact language, the popular spinning tunnel found in Ripley’s odditoriums is never called a “spinning tunnel,” but it is called in a matter-of-fact way, “the vortex” or “the black hole.”

Most of the billboards that I found were positioned within ten miles of the odditoriums, but of course, this may vary depending on the route that is taken to get to them. All of the billboards that I saw said “take a walk on the weird side” and featured a few of the most common exhibits such as a two-headed animal, a Padaung woman with neck rings, and J.T. Saylor who is known for his ability to create distorted facial expressions.

Another form of advertisement for the odditoriums include glimpses of the exhibits inside and free shows. For instance, on the side of the Myrtle Beach odditorium is a glass case that displays a few artifacts to pedestrians who are walking outside the building. Additionally, in all of the odditoriums that I visited, Ripley’s displayed exhibits in the lobbies or on the lawns so that there was a brief free preview of what could be found inside. Furthermore, just like the sideshow ballyhoo, Ripley’s hosts free live performances outside of their odditoriums as an attempt to attract visitors inside. In a YouTube video of an odditorium in New York, a live performance of Eric Sprague is documented. The person

who announces Sprague is standing on what appears to be a platform raised slightly above the audience. The announcer said: “We have a very special guest here at Ripley’s Believe It or Not! today, ladies and gentlemen. He is a legend from the world of sideshow. Please give a big New York round of applause to none other than the Lizardman.” Lizardman performs “the corkscrew” in which he winds a corkscrew through his nose and out through his mouth (BloodyBarbwire 2010).

Other than advertisements, Ripley’s attracts visitors to the odditoriums through their other media forms. For example, I first learned of and became interested in Ripley’s through watching their shows as a child. In Chapter Six, I show how respondents in my surveys and interviews indicated that they also became interested in Ripley’s through other media forms. Often, the odditoriums were not their first encounter with Ripley’s.

#### *4.3 Exterior Decoration and Landscape*

Ripley’s purpose is to display the allegedly strange people from around the world, and this intention is first evident through the decoration of their odditoriums’ exteriors. Before Ripley’s audience even enters the museum doors, they are prepared for thinking about the exhibitions inside as being markedly different. The Ripley’s museum in Orlando, Florida is structured to appear as if it is falling into a sinkhole; this effect is created through the downward tilt of the left half of the building. Other Ripley’s museums are decorated to appear as if they were damaged by earthquakes or by plane crashes, or they take the form of a completely toppled building. The out-of-ordinary exterior signals that Ripley’s is a non-traditional museum in which one will supposedly witness objects and people that cannot be encountered in everyday life or in other museums.

Initially, I thought that Ripley's might utilize the larger landscape, such as the odditorium yard and parking lot, more heavily and directly in the construction of their exhibits as odd. But, in most of the odditoriums that I have visited or have seen in pictures and videos, they often have limited space beyond the museum building. This limited landscape is likely attributed to the positioning of odditoriums in city centers among other entertainment attractions. It seems that Ripley's strategically establishes odditoriums in tourist hot spots as part of their marketing scheme and that they prefer a high-traffic location over bigger lots. Perhaps, indirectly, Ripley's uses the experience of a tourist space as a way to construct their exhibits as out-of-the-ordinary. By definition, tourists are visitors to places that are not part of their everyday experience. Tourist spaces then, are spaces that are imbued with a sense of transience and of being outside of one's usual material and social environment. For some tourists, I imagine the status of not belonging can result in experiencing the feeling of uncanniness. Maybe Ripley's wants their visitors to project their feelings of being in an out-of-ordinary touristic space onto the odditorium space and exhibits inside, thus framing the exhibits as also out-of-the-ordinary.

Through advertisement of potential ghost hauntings, the St. Augustine odditorium in itself has been turned into a Believe It or Not! Unlike other odditoriums that require exterior and interior decorations in order to signal an out-of-ordinary atmosphere, the St. Augustine odditorium can rely on its natural history and architecture to evoke the odd. The designation of the odditorium as a potentially haunted site was enough for me, and I imagine for other visitors, to make a walkthrough of the building seem different than other buildings that I visit on a more frequent basis. Labeling the St. Augustine odditorium as a castle additionally played a role in framing my experience there and the exhibits inside as

odd. Residents of America and many other countries do not have the opportunity to tour castles in their daily lives. Furthermore, in my experience, castles are typically the type of building commonly associated with hauntings, and therefore, the label of the odditorium as a castle highlighted the haunted atmosphere.

The marketing of the odditorium's haunted history and it as a castle is an excellent example of Miller's argument that the immaterial also acts as a frame that shapes our behaviors within our environment (Miller 2010). Intangible or invisible aspects of an environment, as may be the case with ghosts in this example, play a significant role in influencing how we act. When I was walking through the St. Augustine odditorium, for example, I became aware of myself walking through the space more slowly and cautiously than other odditoriums. Part of my slower pace was because I was hoping to experience a ghost but also because I did not want to be spooked by one! On the other hand, I took my time because it was through the labeling of the building as a castle that I came to perceive it as a super ancient structure. My perception of its old age influenced me to tread more carefully to be extra sure I did not damage any of the structures. Using Benjamin's (1936) concept of the aura, I personally behaved in this odditorium as if the building itself had a special aura due to its age and purported ghost history (Benjamin 1936).

#### *4.4 Interior Decoration, Spatial Arrangement, and Sensory Experience*

Ripley's arranges and decorates the interior of their museums to maintain the out-of-ordinary atmosphere. Similar to the role of the exterior, decorating the interior museum space as out-of-the-ordinary signals to the viewer that the exhibits are also to be considered as unordinary. The interior walls are painted neon colors such as bright yellow, orange, and green. Some of the walls are painted in a solid color whereas others are painted with polka

dots. These colors and wall patterns further the agenda of marketing Ripley's as a non-traditional museum. As neon bright colors are not generally seen in formal settings, they seem to create an atmosphere of fun, signaling that the purpose of the odditoriums is for entertainment in addition to education.

Even though Ed Meyer says that he prefers to refer to the exhibition building as an odditorium, on some of the odditorium websites in the section for frequently asked questions, the odditoriums are indeed referred to as museums (e.g. Ripley's Entertainment Inc. 2016e). Therefore, it is not a label that only I am imposing upon the odditoriums. By labeling the odditoriums as museums, the spaces are framed as learning environments because museums have largely been intended for education in American history and culture. Moreover, a few of the odditorium websites describe Ripley's as edutainment, a blend of education with entertainment. As an example, the Gatlinburg Odditorium website says that it is the "perfect fusion of edutainment and interactivity..." (Ripley's Entertainment Inc. 2016e). The expectations and behaviors of visitors are shaped through this framing of the odditoriums as educational and entertainment institutions as I will discuss throughout the chapter.

While some odditorium rooms continue the decorative theme of the exterior, most rooms are themed to look like jungles, caves, temples, and sideshow tents. Themes are meant to make visitors feel as if they are exploring places outside of their everyday experience. Since each odditorium differs in layout and theming, I will highlight specific examples from several odditoriums to illustrate the role of interior decoration. At the Gatlinburg odditorium, the second floor is an open space in which the visitor can look down to the main lobby where other visitors enter the odditorium. The most striking

architectural features of this floor are sculptural representations of popular Ripley's figures that appear to be made out of stone and are made to appear as if they are holding up the ceiling of the odditorium. Their stone bodies stand in for where columns would be. Another decorative element that adds to the atmosphere of out-of-the-ordinary is a door that has dozens of stone noses protruding out of its surface. Additionally, from the second floor, visitors can see a water fountain made to look like a giant floating sink faucet. The illusion that it was floating and not attached to anything added to the atmosphere of the odd.

The Gatlinburg odditorium has a prison themed room that strongly illustrates how Ripley's utilizes sound and lighting along with their room decorations to create the feeling that one has been transported to a place other than a museum. The prison room is dimly lit and displays the exhibits behind prison cells. The floor is a rough concrete, and the walls are made to appear like they are brick. Ripley's plays sound that one would hear at a prison: sounds of footsteps, people talking, metal doors clanking, alarms and sirens going off, toilets flushing, and a man saying "okay you jail birds." In the corner of the room and made to appear like a sheriff's workspace is a worn-out wooden desk with criminal wanted posters strewn across it. The case of the prison themed room is also an example of how Ripley's often explores topics that are rather taboo or hidden in American culture. Prisons in themselves are viewed as spaces that should be avoided. Recall that the taboo and grotesque are similar in the reactions of fear and disgust that they arouse, exemplifying their deviation from normalcy. Therefore, by displaying artifacts in a room that is decorated as a taboo space, the atmosphere of Otherness is created and the Otherness of the artifacts is subsequently accentuated.

At the Myrtle Beach odditorium, one flight of stairs is lined with classical Egyptian imagery and newspaper articles on the discovery of King Tutankhamun's sarcophagus. The walls are a dark sandy brown color that in conjunction with the Egyptian imagery made me feel transported to the deserts of Egypt. I also felt transported back to the era of Tutankhamun; hence, Ripley's not only distorted my sense of place, but also my sense of time. The visitor enters an explicitly themed Egyptian room after ascending the stairs. The room continues the same sandy color with Egyptian hieroglyphics on the walls, and the ceiling is painted to look like a light blue, cloudy sky. The walls and ceiling together made me feel as if I was in the middle of the desert and about to explore inside the ancient Egyptian pyramids. The artifacts are related to Egypt or from there to match the theme.

Connected to this room is a space that is designed to look like the tomb of King Tut. The walls are designed to appear as if they are made from some type of stone, the lights are dimmed, and the room is more narrow than wide. Inset into the walls are thick glass panels with a reddish flickering light behind it which worked to create the appearance of fire torches. The decoration was successful in making me feel as if I was walking through a passageway in search for a sarcophagus. Ripley's placed a large mirror in the tunnel that due to the darkness, one cannot easily discern the outer edges of the mirror. As a result of not being able to see the mirror's outline, I personally did not perceive it as a mirror and instead fell for the illusion that the room was twice as large as it really was. Thus, Ripley's is able to tamper with the perception of space in addition to the actual space to create an atmosphere of the odd. King Tut's tunnel is a further example of how Ripley's relies on the immaterial just as much as the material. While exploring the tunnel and feeling as if I was about to discover the sarcophagus of King Tut, I thought about souls and the afterlife

which made me walk through the space slower just as I had at the St. Augustine odditorium. I perceived the space as almost mystical or spiritual in nature.

Similar to the mirror illusion, there are several rooms in Ripley's odditoriums that are designed to directly tamper with the senses of the visitors. For instance, located in the Orlando odditorium is a room structured to feel as if the floor is sloping which had the effect of causing nausea in several of the visitors when I visited in July 2015. In that room, there is a pool table that appears to be sloping downward to the left, yet when you roll a ball on its surface, the ball appears to defy gravity by rolling upward to the right. The pool table illusion upsets visitors' ideas of gravity. In the example of this room, it is clear that Ripley's attempts to meddle with the physical and mental senses of their visitors to create an experience of the strange.

Likewise, Ripley's decorations are successful at arousing strong emotions in visitors. Shown in a video of the Grand Prairie Texas odditorium is that of a tornado themed room which fits the realities of the local place. The sign before entering the room says: "Welcome to Tornado Alley Texas..." Another sign as you first walk into the room says "get inside our tornado cellar." The room is very dark and lights flash through the windows to make it seem like there is lightning, much as one would experience during a tornado. It could not be determined whether visitors could feel wind in the room, but if so, they did not mention it. The cameraman said, "this is what it sounds like in a tornado," which to me can best be described as sounds of strong, roaring wind. After the tornado room, they enter another one that is supposed to mimic the experience of life post-tornado. The room is decorated to look like there are fallen wood beams and piles of things that were thrown around by the tornado. You can hear the sounds of ambulance sirens and see an occasional



overhead flash of light, perhaps to mock the lights of ambulances or post-tornado lightning flashes (The Geek Redneck 2010).

Throughout the room are information panels that describe tales of survival in Texas tornadoes (The Geek Redneck 2010). Just watching the video had an emotional impact on me. Among the lighting, the sounds, and the mock tornado damage, it made me think of my experience with a tornado in 2008. A tornado destroyed a boat factory in my neighborhood and caused extensive damage to houses near mine, but my family, fortunately, did not have much damage to our house. I could hear the roaring of the tornado, which was so loud that it sounded like it was going right over my house. While watching the video, I thought back to the moments after the tornado when I heard the sounds of ambulances constantly driving by and the sounds of busy phone lines as everyone tried to contact their loved ones. I imagine if the room could have that impact on me, then it is not unrealistic to think that other visitors, especially those who have experienced a tornado as well, might also be emotionally affected by the room. I almost forgot the cameraman was at an odditorium instead of me while I watched this, and that was shocking to me. Ripley's was successful in creating a jolting experience with this tornado room.

While tornadoes are not unusual natural events, this room was designed to create the feeling of being transported from time and space and placed at the heart of such disaster. This room is an example of how Ripley's continues the decorative theme of disaster from the exterior façade of an odditorium (e.g. plane crashes and falling into a sinkhole) to the interior. Like touristic spaces, disasters are times of unrest as the normality of the everyday is disrupted, which makes it a perfect theme for creating an atmosphere of the out-of-ordinary.

At the odditoriums that I visited, Ripley's guides your path through the museum in a particular way unless you take the elevator. It seems though that these elevators are only used by persons who are in wheelchairs, have baby strollers, or otherwise cannot climb the stairs. You generally cannot choose which room to go into first because one room leads to the next in a linear way. There are, however, side rooms that have bathrooms, vending machines, or sitting areas to catch a quick respite before moving on to the main part of the museum. If visitors wanted to, though, they could walk all the way to the end of the odditorium and backtrack. There is no one telling them otherwise. However, I have not witnessed any visitors doing this nor do I think there would be major changes in experience other than some of Ripley's foolery might be revealed preemptively which might take away some moments of shock and humor as I will soon discuss. To assure the visitor of their way through the museum, Ripley's has placed signs that say "museum continues this way" with arrows pointing in the right direction. It is possible that Ripley's stricter control over the order that visitors view the exhibits results in a particular interpretation of those exhibits.

#### *4.5 Shock, Humor, Reflexivity, and the Reverse Gaze*

Since Ripley's markets their odditoriums as not just educational but also entertainment, humor plays a significant role in creating an entertaining and fun atmosphere. A striking way that this is accomplished is through playing tricks on their visitors. At the Gatlinburg odditorium, Ripley's installed fake bathrooms that when you open the door, you hear a startled scream as it looks like you are about to walk in on someone. In actuality, it is a wax figure that Ripley's placed in this fake bathroom; the bathroom cannot even be opened all the way. Once you find the real bathrooms, you are

confronted with more fun. Ripley's created an illusion that a man is behind the bathroom mirror doing janitorial work. The man walks back and forth and talks to the viewer, though I could never understand what was being said due to other noises. For some visitors, the man in the mirror trick might be unsettling and shocking as it playfully transgresses the sense of bathroom privacy.

Just as the odditorium exhibits are always subjected to the gaze of the visitors, the visitors cannot escape the reverse gaze of Ripley's as evident through the man-in-the-mirror example. As I will soon discuss in more depth, the construction of the reverse gaze might be one technique that Ripley's uses to trigger visitors to scrutinize their own bodies and behaviors. Through the scrutiny of their own bodies, the Otherness of the exhibits can either be accentuated or challenged. Furthermore, in thinking about Foucault's theory of Panopticism, the reverse gaze as instilled through the odditorium mirrors and trickery also acts as a mechanism of self-regulation among visitors (Foucault 1980). Ripley's is able to shape the behaviors of their visitors without force or direct command because visitors may always feel like they are or could be under constant surveillance. It is an example of the power of materiality in shaping people's actions.

For another example of humor, the Myrtle Beach odditorium bathroom emanates the sounds of flatulence. Recall that one aspect of the grotesque is the attention to parts and processes of the body, such as urination and flatulence, which have often been treated as inferior to other characteristics of being human (Perttula 2011, 34). The flatulence machine at this odditorium is a prime example of how the grotesque becomes a spectacle at Ripley's. Ripley's also achieves humor through exhibits that are designed to shock visitors. In all of the odditoriums that I visited, there was a chest with a sign that says "do not open the box."

Ripley's knows their guests will be curious and open the box anyway, and when they do, a loud and shrill scream reverberates throughout the entire room. It is definitely shocking the first time you hear it, and because the box does not open all the way, it is tempting to keep trying to open it! Therefore, it is evident that sound becomes another tool that Ripley's uses to tamper with the senses of their visitors.

As another shocking decorative element, all odditoriums that I visited display some of their artifacts behind a falling platform that plays with a visitor's sense of gravity. In order to see the artifacts clearly, one has to step on the platform, but when you do, it drops down suddenly as if your weight broke it. Even after research in multiple odditoriums and knowing what would happen if I stepped on the platform, it always succeeded in making my heart race. A second example of how Ripley's disorients and shocks visitors through upsetting their sense of gravity is a spinning tunnel that visitors walk through to get to the next room (figure 4.1). When walking through the tunnel, it feels as if you are spinning as well. For some visitors this can be a nauseating experience, but for others it is entertaining, shocking, and humorous. Luckily, Ripley's allows visitors the option of not walking through the tunnel to get to the next room. It is one of few places in the odditorium in which visitors can more easily control their walkthrough experience.

Finally, all odditoriums have an exhibit that challenges visitors to reach their hand into a hole in the wall to attempt grabbing what appears to be a jewel. It is a holographic jewel though, and if you stick your hand too far back, a burst of air suddenly blows your hand, which I have witnessed startling quite a few visitors including myself.

Why is shock so important in a museum like Ripley's? Other than adding to the entertainment value, such exhibits intensify the culture shock of the artifacts and people

that are displayed. Ripley's is trying to present people and artifacts that they think will be interpreted as so strange and unbelievable that it is shocking to learn that they truly exist. These decorative elements, like the fake bathrooms, spinning tunnels, and falling platforms, maintain and heighten a sense of shock as visitors walk through the odditorium.

A goal of anthropology is to render the strange familiar and the familiar strange. To do so, anthropologists no longer only study people foreign to them, but through reflexivity, they also study people within their own society, including themselves. Reflexivity is the process of critically examining our own cultural practices using anthropological methodology and theory. We try to think and write about our own culture as if we are an outsider. There were many instances of Ripley's encouraging reflexivity. Ripley's does not only aim to show the oddness of foreign people, but they also want to accentuate how each visitor's culture can be considered odd when reflected upon.

A common video shown in the odditoriums is on the Yanomami people of Venezuela and Brazil, who, according to the video, relies on the rainforest to find food sources such as insects. It appears that Ripley's did a voice-over of what might have been ethnographic footage. Ripley's and the video do not provide a timeframe as to when the footage was taken, so the visitor might assume that the Yanomami still live that way. As insects are not typically found in the diet of the general public in America and other Western countries, many visitors might react in disgust to learn of the Yanomami's diet. However, Ripley's intercedes and tells viewers to read the ingredient list of the foods that they eat before they judge the Yanomami. They do not say much further than that, but that reminder might be effective enough to encourage critical thinking in the visitors.

In the spirit of the carnivalesque, these attempts of reflexivity instill the reverse gaze that turns the odditorium visitors into a spectacle themselves, often with humor involved. It is in these moments of the reverse gaze that it seems Ripley's is trying to bridge cultural differences and to have visitors focus on their commonalities. We too can be considered strange when viewed from an outsider. By Ripley's directing visitors to focus on commonalities, categories of strangeness may actually be challenged for some visitors. On the contrary, I will discuss later in the chapter how moments of the reverse gaze might be used to highlight differences through binary opposition that then reinforces categories of Otherness.

An exhibit that exemplifies Ripley's humor and that may also be potential technique of the reverse gaze is the one that challenges visitors to attempt rolling their tongue in a mirror. Every odditorium that I visited or seen in videos had this exhibit. The exhibit states that only one in four people can roll their tongue, and it shows footage and photos of people who are able to do so. The mirror looks plain enough until you make it to the end of the odditorium and realize that the mirror was two-way, and that visitors on the other side could see you trying to roll your tongue. They have a video that visitors can scroll back and see themselves earlier in the museum attempting to roll their tongue; you can, of course, see other visitors attempting the same feat. All visitors are transformed into a subject of the spectacle, and the gaze of other visitors is on them. This exhibit only has an effect if viewed in the linear way that Ripley's arranges. If a visitor started at the end of the odditorium and moved backward, he or she would know about the trick.

A second example of the reverse gaze is an exhibit located at the Orlando odditorium. The exhibit is a tiny hole in the wall with a sign that says "do not look in this

hole.” Like in the case of the screaming box, Ripley’s is using reverse psychology here to peak the curiosity of the visitor and to get him or her to actually look through the hole. When you do, you see a live video image of your backside. It is at that point that you learn a camera is placed behind you and that your foolery of falling into the trap of the trick is made into a spectacle.

#### *4.6 Sideshows and Cabinet of Curiosities*

The atmosphere of the sideshow is ever present in Ripley’s odditoriums. To accomplish this atmosphere, sideshow references are purposely made, such as decorating a room to look like a sideshow tent or playing videos that narrate in similar ways as sideshow showmen. Through their use of the sideshow theme, Ripley’s is intending for their viewers to feel as if they are visiting a sideshow. Therefore, visitors are encouraged to think of the exhibits as different and Other, like intended in the historical and current sideshow.

When you first enter the second floor of the Gatlinburg odditorium, there is a video that plays what sounds like carnival music as the narrator says:

“Step right up. Welcome to the world of the strange, the unusual, the fantastic. Leave the common ways behind, take a voyage to the unreal. Perhaps you’re about to witness human beings with talents that are so incredibly bizarre you may not believe your eyes. They will perform feats that defy logic and yet, each one is authentic, each one completely documented, genuine, and legitimate; each one from the Ripley archives. Believe It or Not!”

As the narrator speaks, the video shows footage of the referenced people performing their stunts or showing off the features of their body that caused them to receive the attention of Ripley’s. The video shows R.H. Hubbard who is billed as having the strongest eyes in the world. As Hubbard pulls around a woman in a wagon with his eyelids, the narrator says:

“The incredible feat you are witnessing has never been accomplished by any other human on this earth. The danger is obvious. The rewards: this woman hasn’t had to take public transit in eleven years! And as if this bizarre compulsion doesn’t take him to the edge of human experience, ask yourself can a man drive nails into his head and live to tell the tale...”

Compare this video’s narration to the opening sequence of the show *Freakshow* that spotlights the performers and owners at the Venice Beach Freak Show in California. Todd Ray, the owner of the freak show and the narrator of the show’s opening sequence, says:

“Folks, today you will witness the strangest creatures on Earth, the living wonders of the world, and the most amazing people on the planet. They’re all inside. What you thought was a myth, you will see with your own eyes. Welcome to the freak show” (AMC Network Entertainment 2013).

“Step right up” is a common opening line in sideshows and so is the promise of seeing people and things that one has never seen before and never will have the chance to see again. Both Ripley’s narration and that of Todd Ray describe the exhibits inside as so unbelievable that they seemingly defy reality and logic, that they seemingly come from our myths, and that we will not believe it is true until we view their show.

In a video of the odditorium in Blackpool, United Kingdom, there is a notable decorative element that harkens to the tricks of P.T. Barnum (Experimentalfilms123 2010). At the end of the odditorium, a sign says: “Believe It or Not, this way to the world’s great egress.” To keep his sideshows from becoming too crowded, Barnum placed a similar sign to trick people into leaving the attraction. “Egress” means “exit”, but the visitors would be fooled into thinking it was another exhibit (Bogdan 1988). This is another example of Ripley’s humor and of their connection to the old sideshow.



In addition to harkening to sideshows, the odditoriums are like cabinets of curiosities in the often eclectic arrangement of their exhibits and the minimal context provided for several artifacts. At the St. Augustine odditorium, several glass cases display artifacts of different cultural origins and types, and numerous artifacts are displayed with only a label of what they are without any other cultural context. For example, Ripley's simply called one artifact "Tibetan human bone flute" and another "tortoise shell armband," and both were placed near each other in the same glass case without an explicit connection. Like the historical cabinet of curiosity in which people boasted of their travels through the display of what they collected, it seems that Ripley's only message, when they leave out context information, is: "look at these cool objects we collected!" The viewers are allowed to brew their own ideas of who made these things, why, when, and how.

Since examining the ethics of the display practices of Ripley's and other similar attractions requires more in-depth research than time allowed for this project, I choose to refrain from concluding what might be good or bad about the cabinet of curiosity genre. Though, it does seem that the technique might aid in the agenda of communicating Otherness. In many cases, allowing the viewer to impose their own interpretations of the artifacts could lead to misunderstandings of the cultural practice and perhaps lead to ethnocentric assessments. Someone seeing "Tibetan human bone flute" without an understanding of who makes these flutes, why they do so, and when this practice took place, might conclude that all current-day Tibetans use the body parts of their deceased to create musical instruments. They might assume that the practice still exists while it might have actually been centuries since this practice last occurred, and they might extrapolate from the flute to judge the nature of all Tibetan people's relationship with the deceased. It

is possible too that visitors might impose their own notions of what is a respectful treatment of the dead to then conclude that all Tibetans are disrespectful to their deceased. It cannot be concluded that all viewers would come to this conclusion; in fact, other viewers might think positively of such a practice. However, the lack of information does not serve to educate on the complexity of people within one cultural group which is a concern of anthropologists now.

Only some of the exhibits were treated in the manner of the cabinet of curiosities. It was never the entire odditorium. In my experience, a majority of the exhibits were organized to match the theme of the room. Wax bodies were often displayed together in the same room, and the remains and models of animals with mutations were usually found together as well. Like in the Myrtle Beach odditorium, all exhibits on body modification would be together and all exhibits relating to Egyptian history had their own room. Nevertheless, within some of the themes, notably the jungle theme, Ripley's usually displayed artifacts from an eclectic group of cultures deemed to be tribal. Artifacts from New Guinea might be shown with objects from parts of Africa or South America. Hence, it is a rather subjective judgement about which of Ripley's exhibits should be considered organized and which should not. While some visitors might not see certain exhibits as being organized, Ripley's might have an order in mind. I might feel that I am exploring a cabinet of curiosities that is just a chaotic juxtaposition of eclectic things whereas other visitors might perceive the space differently.

#### *4.7 The Adventurer Trope*

In Chapter Three, I discussed how the odditoriums are designed to feel as if we are experiencing travel. As visitors move through themed rooms, climb stairs, risk spinning

tunnels and falling platforms, and witness travel emblems, they are made to feel as if they are going on adventures to encounter the world's people and artifacts just as Rob Ripley did. I discussed earlier in this chapter that Robert Ripley has been portrayed in the media as an adventurer like Marco Polo and Indiana Jones, and this creates a sense that his travels were perhaps risky and heroic in face of the supposedly strange people who he would have to contend with to acquire the treasures. To me, by calling attention to the journey that Rob Ripley went through to collect the objects, the foreignness and ergo, Otherness, of the objects are highlighted. Making the odditorium experience into a traveler's journey also reiterates the museum as an entertainment space.

Ripley's maintains a strong connection to the founder Robert Ripley by displaying the following: artifacts that he collected on his travels; original Ripley's cartoon drawings and copies of them; photographs and video footage of Ripley posing with the natives of places he traveled; and biographical information on Ripley. A few of the odditoriums, such as that the one in St. Augustine, have created wax figures of Robert Ripley in order to market his accomplishments as Believe It or Nots! as well. He has become an icon of his own brand! Robert Ripley, for example, was the first to broadcast radio programs in several places such as underground, underwater, and from the sky. He was also known for being the first millionaire cartoonist, and as stated previously, he was known as the most popular man during his time. Videos in the odditoriums describe and show the travels of Robert Ripley. One video states:

“He was the greatest traveler of his time, the modern Marco Polo. He discovered the wonders of the Old World long before the tourists arrived by jet...Rip was never content to be a sightseer. He wanted the strange, the exotic, the incredible, like the African sausage tree, or the Japanese roosters with tails up to forty feet long, or an island that

floated over an underground African lake, and people, ever strange, ever odd, but probably none of them as odd as Robert Ripley himself...”

From this video’s narration, the power in gazing at Others is reversed as Mr. Ripley himself is turned into a spectacle of the odd. Harkening once more to the carnivalesque, the distinction between “us” and “them” is blurred as even the strangeness of the odditoriums’ founder is highlighted.

In the Gatlinburg and Orlando odditoriums, visitors receive more doses of Rob Ripley’s adventures through a holographic exhibit of him. The following description is of the hologram in the Gatlinburg odditorium. You cannot enter the room that the hologram is in; you can only look through an arched opening. The wall that the archway is set into is made out of what appears to be bamboo. Masks and spears, the origin in which is not disclosed, hang on the outer wall near where the viewers would stand to look inside. Also hanging right outside the hologram’s room is a pair of muddied boots on the floor and a khaki coat and pith helmet hanging on the wall as if Mr. Ripley just returned from an adventure. Next to the hanging clothes is a Khabli skull bowl in a glass case, and the glass case is inset in a stand that is made to appear like a twisted tree root. Inside the hologram’s room is a desk, also appearing to be made of bamboo, that is littered with a globe, a stack of books, a lantern, a statue, and writing supplies. I could not ascertain the exact material of the interior walls, but they were made to appear like a weather-worn and rusty concrete. Pith hats and a Congo dagger line the walls of this room, and pottery clutters the floor.

Sitting behind the desk is a hologram of Rob Ripley that speaks to the viewer. After hearing the actual voice of Mr. Ripley in his television shows, the hologram sounds convincingly like him. Perhaps they utilized actual audio of him here. Because of the

odditorium's various noises, I had a difficult time understanding exactly what he was saying, though I did ascertain that he says: "Hello everybody. Welcome. Please, come in. I'm so glad you are here to see some of the unbelievable things I collected." As he talks, the globe actually spins when the hologram appears to be spinning it, and the lantern light goes out when the hologram snaps his fingers. Finally, when the hologram disappears, the chair he was sitting in appears to swivel back and forth, like it would if he suddenly stood up. As stated in Chapter Two, the technologies used to disseminate information at Ripley's have become Believe It or Nots! as well. During my visits, the hologram exhibit always has a crowd of visitors who expressed amazement at the way the objects in the room moved in sync with the hologram's movement.

#### *4.8 Wax Bodies: Realism and Binary Opposition*

Throughout the odditoriums, Ripley's encourages visitors to compare themselves to the exhibits by incorporating interactive elements, and it is from this comparison that the Otherness of the exhibits is emphasized. To recap, Otherness is constructed through binary oppositions; we only understand what something is through the recognition of things with differing qualities (Levi-Strauss 1977; Saussure 1906-1911; Sturken and Cartwright 2001). Since Ripley's goal is to present their exhibits as belonging to the category of the strange and Other, they have visitors compare their own bodies and cultural practices to that of the exhibits so that they can recognize the differences.

At Ripley's odditorium in St. Augustine, one of the rooms contains the following wax figures: Edward Hagner, also known as "the Skeleton Dude", who was five feet and seven inches tall and weighed forty-eight pounds; Robert Wadlow, who at eight feet and eleven inches tall was the tallest man in recorded history; and Robert Earl Hughes, who

was the heaviest man ever drafted. To direct visitors to compare their bodies to these wax figures, Ripley's placed footprints on the floor in various areas of the room so that visitors will know exactly how to position their bodies to best see themselves in relation to the wax models. When visitors stand on the footprints, they are positioned in front of or next to one of the wax models and positioned to face a mirror. In my experience of standing on the footprints, the mirrors seemed to distort my body to appear extremely opposite the height or weight of the wax models. When the mirror distorts the visitor's body to be opposite of the model's body, the model's weight and height differences are accentuated. This is an example of how the reverse gaze and binary opposition serves to accentuate the exhibits as deviating outside of the norm.

In Chapter Two, I talked about how sideshow performers would use props to accentuate their physical differences. Ripley's utilizes a similar technique in the display of their wax models. For instance, Ripley's accentuates the thinness of the Skeleton Dude's body by displaying his figure behind thin vertical blinds (figure 4.2). The vertical orientation of the blinds draws the viewers' eyes to wander up and down the length of Hagner's body in which his body weight is emphasized. This positioning of Hagner's body allows the viewer to compare parts of his body, like his arms and legs, to the thinness of the blinds. He is the only figure in the room that is displayed behind blinds. All of Ripley's figures of Robert Wadlow that I have seen show him holding a ruler which in itself is enough to accentuate his height, but his height is also accentuated through the act of visitors standing next to Wadlow to compare their heights to his (figure 4.3). Ripley's does not expect for there to be visitor that is as tall as Wadlow, and hence, Wadlow is always recognized as being outside of bodily norms.

The figure of Robert Hughes, “the heaviest man ever drafted,” is leaning forward at a noticeable angle as if his stomach is so heavy that it is dragging him to the ground (figure. 4.4). Positioning his body in this way accentuates and further constructs Hughes as an extremely overweight person. Robert Hughes has also been made into a photo op outside of the lobby at the Gatlinburg odditorium (figure 4.5). Passerby can take pictures with the figure of Hughes without having to pay admission to the odditorium. It is a headless sculpture that only shows the front side of Hughes’s body. The sculpture is hollow in the back with a set of steps that allows visitors to climb inside and place their head where Hughes’ head would be otherwise. The purpose is to allow visitors to pretend that they have the body of Hughes and to capture the moment with photos. These exhibits provide the public with a glimpse of the types of people and artifacts inside, and it becomes clear in the presentation of Hughes that body weight is a spectacle at Ripley’s.

Walter Hudson is another figure commonly presented by Ripley’s for being overweight. Hudson is referred to as “the 1400lb man.” At the St. Augustine odditorium, Hudson’s wax figure is topless (figure 4.6). The only article of clothing that he is wearing is a loose fabric that looks like a bed sheet wrapped around the lower half of his body. The exposure of his upper-torso reveals to the viewers hanging folds of body fat. More of his body than some of the other wax figures is allowed to be under the scrutinizing gaze of visitors. If his body weight was not accentuated enough in this way, Ripley’s includes a list of Hudson’s average daily diet in the information panel. I have also observed Hudson being Othered by viewers in their questions of his gender. It was common for viewers to ask their family and friends whether Hudson was a man or woman. Many assumed Hudson was a woman because of his long, braided hair and perhaps because of the floral fabric that

wraps his lower body like a skirt. Relating to my theoretical discussion on the categories of the taboo and the grotesque, questioning Hudson's gender identity places in him an ambiguous category. Categorizing someone as ambiguous is another Othering practice because no one knows how to place themselves in relation to the ambiguous figure; it is more difficult to find a point of commonality. Viewers are not sure how the Hudson figure relates to themselves.

Making exhibits out of wax plays a role in how Ripley's is able to present the people represented as Other. Otherness is communicated because the visitor is confronting a figure that at first glance might be mistaken for a fellow living person; yet at a second glance, the figure seems to defy categorization. The figure is not living but is so real that it seems more than a simple representational object. Scholars have theorized that a startling experience has been historically common when confronting a wax figure because a convincing appearance of human skin can be easily produced in wax (Panzanelli 2008; Kormeier 2008). Kormeier (2008) states: "...a well-made wax figure can exude such a strong corporeal presence that we are convinced, against our better judgment, that we are in the company of a fellow human being rather than a lifeless image" (Kormeier 2008, 67). The time that it takes for the viewer to realize that the wax figure is indeed an inanimate object rather than a real person has been referred to as "the waxwork moment." (Kormeier 2008, 67). Making exhibits out of a material that causes these unsettling moments of figuring out what is living and what is an object is important for a museum like Ripley's that is attempting to create an experience of the uncanny.

In temporarily tricking the brain that an inanimate object is alive, the figure is consigned to an in-between category of "not quite human" but "not quite object." As I



observed at Ripley's, visitors, including myself, spent considerable time touching the wax figures, marveling at their realism, and trying to understand exactly what to think of them. In these investigations, our otherwise solid boundaries between human and non-human were uprooted. Based on the arguments that anything that does not neatly fit within established categories is often considered taboo and grotesque, wax figures take on this status as Other because they play on the border of our categories of human and object (Bakhtin 1984; Douglas 1999; Edwards and Graulund 2013; Perttula 2011).

A commentator on a YouTube video filmed at the Williamsburg, Virginia odditorium also talked about the realism of the wax figures. The comment says (part of the grammar is edited): "I went there today. But it was scary done if the wax figure looked so real. I touched the girl's hair with things on her neck, and when I was about to leave, her hair flipped back by itself" (Tricia's Channel 2010). It seems that this commentator is describing the wax model of the Padaung woman. When commenting on the realism of the model, it was interesting that the responder expresses an experience of seeing the hair move on its own. As it is important in anthropology to analyze experiences without imposing notions of "irrationality," I do not want to conclude that the shock of the model's realism resulted in the viewer hallucinating that the hair moved. However, this comment serves as an excellent example of what Kormeier theorized about interactions with wax figures. These figures become more than simply wax objects. We start to question our interactions with them. They seem more than other types of representational objects, but they are not human either.

I too have experienced temporary moments in which I was fooled by Ripley's wax models thinking that they were real people. In my first visit to a Ripley's odditorium, I

encountered a pair of wax figures that were positioned across from each other (figure 4.7). One was holding a camera and was made to appear like he was taking a picture of the other one. At the time, I did not realize that they both were wax. I thought one figure was an odditorium visitor taking a photo of a wax model. In order to enter the next room, I had to walk between the two figures. After several minutes of waiting as to not interrupt the photo, my partner had to inform me that I had been fooled by wax.

In a room at the Myrtle Beach odditorium that is themed to be about body modification, there is a wax model of a Padaung woman who showcases the practice of wearing neck rings to create the appearance of a lengthened neck. Also displayed is a wax figure of Eric Sprague and Maria Cristerna. The Padaung, Sprague, and Cristerna figures were found at all odditoriums that I visited and in all YouTube videos that I watched of other odditoriums. The Padaung and Sprague models stand on a platform that rotates the figures, giving the viewer a 360-degree perspective. Displayed on the walls of the room include posters of tattooed persons, Padaung neck rings that visitors can feel, a display case of Burmese tattoo designs, and a video featuring Eric Sprague.

While I examined the figures, I was amazed at how realistic they are. The Sprague model, for example, looked like he had pores and goosebumps, and the Padaung model looked like she had makeup caked into the pores on her face. I did not feel comfortable touching the wax figures because I was not sure if that was allowed, but other visitors would pose in pictures with the models or stroke their wax skin. It was common to hear visitors talk about how realistic the models looked and how “weird” the models felt.

In describing Eric Sprague, Ripley’s wrote that he “...for the last fourteen years has been transforming himself into a reptile-Lizardman! He has green scale-like tattoos from

head to foot, Teflon implant horns in his forehead, fangs and even a forked tongue!” (Gatlinburg odditorium 2015). Here is another example of Ripley’s using matter-of-fact language to describe an exhibit. In this case, Sprague is described not similar in appearance to a lizard, but as actually a reptile and Lizardman. Maria Jose Cristerna is labeled by Ripley’s as “the World’s Most Unusual Woman” due to her self-transformation to appear like a vampire. In her information panel, Ripley’s says: “Maria was an abused teenager and reinvented herself in her late 20s as a vampire as a sign of her new found inner strength to overcome all adversities...” (Gatlinburg Odditorium 2015). Rather than saying that Cristerna reinvented herself to *appear* like a vampire, she is described as reinventing herself *as* a vampire.

It was and is common in sideshows and at Ripley’s for the displayed persons to be given human-animal nicknames, such as “giraffe woman”, “lizard man”, and “cat man.” Sometimes the figures are given nicknames of mythical creatures as in the case of the Cristerna being sometimes referred to as “vampire woman”, or as in the case of another Ripley’s figure who is known as “the human unicorn” due to a growth on his head that resembles a horn. Similar to how the nature of wax defies categories, the language used to talk about these figures makes viewers ponder who or what the figures are; they are talked about as if they are not quite human, but not quite animal. The use of human-animal nicknames to defy categories is an Othering technique.

#### *4.9 The Primitive and the Exotic*

In general, I did not notice an evolutionary chronology of how artifacts were exhibited. By this, I mean that I did not see all artifacts and bodies of so-called non-Western people displayed together and separate from that of Western people nor did I see prehistoric

artifacts displayed in a room before historic artifacts. I also did not see artifacts from groups of people considered to be bands and tribes displayed before chiefdoms and nation-states. However, I did wonder if the placement of artifacts in some rooms could hint at how Ripley's exhibitors categorize people and their material culture. The following is only a potential example, but more research would have to be conducted to form a solid conclusion. One room at the Gatlinburg Odditorium appears to be designed like a prehistoric landscape. I interpreted the room in this way because it has giant shadows on the wall of dinosaurs with dinosaur sounds, a simulated waterfall, a volcano decoration, and a smoke machine that is either supposed to represent smoke for the volcano or mist for the waterfall. The wall appears to be made from rock, and there are fake trees that display artifacts. This room displays the skeletal remains and fossils of animals, like dinosaur bones.

Not directly in this room but connected to it, there is a display of artifacts only from non-Western places. Among the artifacts are a "Haitian Voodoo Statue," a "West African Crocodile Carving," a "Wood Craved African Pillow," a set of "Nigerian Ibeji ('Twin') Dolls," and a "Genuine Fiji Island Cannibal Fork." Again, without more data to support a conclusion, I can only speculate that perhaps non-Western people are viewed here as being chronologically closer to prehistoric times in their crafts and technology. It was never explicitly stated by Ripley's or by fellow visitors near me, but because of the placement of these non-Western objects next to a prehistoric cave, they might be perceived as more primitive. Presenting non-Western people as primitive has been problematic in the history of anthropological writing and museums. Therefore, understanding how institutions might convey the message of people as primitive, not only directly in their language but also

through the placement of artifacts in the spatial layout, is an important endeavor to be addressed more thoroughly in future research.

One of the artifacts at the St. Augustine odditorium is labeled as a “primitive New Guinea war club.” This artifact has contextual information displayed along with it. In this case, Ripley’s did try to convey the complexity of people. The panel says: “Believe It or Not!, there are 700 tribes in Papua, New Guinea, each with its own culture, language, and traditions.” What is meant by primitive in the title of the object? Ripley’s never addressed what they mean by the term. They never provide a date as to when these so-called primitive war clubs were used, though they do use language that references the past in describing the club. Anthropologists generally try to avoid describing people and their material culture as “primitive” because historically the term has been used in negative ways, such as to claim that a culture is less evolved and hence, inferior. It cannot be established that Ripley’s is using the term in this way, but without an explanation of what is meant by “primitive,” viewers might interpret the New Guineans based on their notions of what primitive means.

The information panel describing an Igorot head-hunter’s knife refers to the Igorot as having had a savage past. “Savage” is an analogous term to “primitive.” The full description reads:

“This knife was once used by an Igorot tribesman of the Philippine Islands. Known as ‘the wild people’, the Igorot still read omens from animal sacrifices and venerate sacred trees and mountains. Once notorious as head-hunters and merciless warriors, their savage past still makes their neighbors nervous. Recently one Filipino newspaper warned picnickers that “it’s head-hunting time again” (St. Augustine odditorium 2015).

It is not clear why the information about the Igorot reading omens and venerating sacred nature is connected to the description of them as “wild people” or what exactly is meant

here by “wild.” Perhaps the description of wild simply means that they have intimacy with nature, but some viewers might interpret wild as similar in meaning to savage. Is it only their reputation for head-hunting that warrants them described as having a savage past, or is it their spiritual practices as well? I do not have an answer to this question, but given my confusion, it is likely that viewers might conflate the spiritual practices as part of the reason why their past is described as savage.

Like the use of primitive, viewers might interpret it to mean that those practices are indicative of inferiority. If someone interpreted these terms to mean that the Igorot people are inferior, it is not certain how they would use that information. Would it have lasting negative consequence such as burgeoning prejudiced thoughts toward the Igorot and other groups of people who have been described in this way? This is a question to be answered in a future reception study. Perhaps Ripley’s usage of savage and primitive fits the theorization by Fabian that dichotomizing language is used to create distance between the subject described by the language and the describer or viewer of the subject (Fabian 2002). Considering that *modern* and *civilized* are antonyms of *primitive* and *savage*, Ripley’s creates a temporal and cultural distance between the groups of people who are labeled by them as primitive and savage and their modern-day and so-called civilized viewers. Like Fabian indicated, this distance allows for comfortability in studying and gazing at the subject by the viewer (Fabian 2002). Consequently, it is in this act of gazing that the subject becomes an object of our knowledge, and in this case, becomes susceptible to the categorization as Other.

Primitive is used again to describe a New Guinean cassowary bone dagger that is positioned next to the Igorot head-hunter’s knife. The panel says: “Lacking forged metal,

the primitive natives of New Guinea often use cassowary bird bones to create weapons” (St. Augustine odditorium 2015). Regardless if the public interprets primitive as inferior in some way, primitive is still a way of markedly categorizing these New Guineans as different. They are not simply just “native New Guineans,” but rather they are “primitive native New Guineans.” What makes this information panel as different from some of the others that use the term is that this panel talks about the New Guineans as if they still create weapons in this way. They use language of the present tense. To describe present-day New Guineans as primitive might evoke different interpretations and reactions than when it is used to describe a past group of people.

The information panel for a West African sorcerer’s shirt at the odditorium in Blackpool, U.K. says: “Amongst most primitive tribes, shaman play a central role in all areas of tribal life, and are greatly respected for their magical power...” (Experimentalfilms 123 2010). First, by saying “amongst most primitive tribes...”, it sounded like Ripley’s is making a claim that primitive tribes still exist and that a so-called primitive group is one that has the presence of a shaman-like figure, who Ripley’s describes as someone who uses the bones of small animals in healing and religious rituals. It is possible then that visitors might impose whatever notions they have of primitive unto groups that have figures who are labeled as shamans.

Displayed at the Dallas, Texas odditorium around the month of July 2010 was a poster of a so-called Ubangi person (Ripley’s label of the person) wearing a lip plate. Since this observation is taken from a YouTube video filmed by another person, I did not have control over what I was able to see. I could see that the poster says: “Authentic!-Fact!-Not Fiction! Half Brute, Half Human! They dive from trees to kill! The new African thriller...”

(The Geek Redneck 2010). From my view, I could not ascertain if Ripley's provided contextualization for this poster, such as whether it was a vintage poster from one of the sideshows or if it was Ripley's own creation. However, from the video's angle, I did not see any information to describe the poster. It begs the question of what Ripley's was trying to communicate with this poster. The poster seemed to have created that traditional sideshow atmosphere, harkening to the sideshow tent banners that would depict the performers quite literally as non-human in some way. The cameraman did not comment on the poster nor have I found another YouTube video in which the poster is discussed.

In another part of the same video, an information panel of an "Oriental jade scepter" captured my attention. The information for it said: "People of the Orient value jade above all other gems. It is said to mirror human qualities. . .superstitious people thought jade could cure their kidney ailments" (The Geek Redneck 2010). Overall, Ripley's is rather successful at presenting information on culture in a way an anthropologist strives for: in a way that does not present the cultural practice or belief as invalid or as a falsity. In this case, however, what is Ripley's intention with using the term "superstitious?" In the study of the anthropology of religion and magic, "superstitious" is often used to describe the belief in something that cannot be explained through Western science. Anthropologists are careful about using the term superstitious because, for many viewers, it might connote irrationality. While it cannot be claimed that this was Ripley's intention, we often do not critically think about the words that are so embedded in our culture, and as a result, we may fail to consider the different meanings or connotations that others might have for those words.



As a potential counter-example to their usage of superstitious, Ripley's often describes their exhibits in a way that captures the emic (insider perspective) without questioning the validity of such cultural beliefs and practices. Regarding New Guinea nose bone decorations at the Gatlinburg odditorium, Ripley's states: "...the more elaborate the decoration, the fiercer the wearer would seem, striking fear into his enemies and scaring evil spirits." Like an anthropologist studying religion, Ripley's writes about spirits without questioning the truth or falsehood of their existence. They talk about the spirits as if matter-of-fact which captures the insider perspective. Despite trying to emphasize the alleged strangeness of people overall, they do not directly label anyone's practices or beliefs as irrational or inferior in any way. Therefore, I can only offer potential connotations that visitors might have for adjectives that Ripley's uses, like primitive, savage, and superstitious, but I cannot make any claims as to what Ripley's intends, especially due to the diversity of opinions among even their own employees.

In the same video with the Ubangi poster and Oriental jade scepter, there is a room containing shrunken heads that is labeled as the "lost temple of the primitives" (The Geek Redneck 2010). After a woman read the name of this sign out loud, a child can be heard responding, "that's not nice." It is unclear if the child was responding to the name of the room, but his response came right after the woman read the name. If this is the case, perhaps this child thinks of "primitive" as having a negative connotation and is critically thinking about the implications of using that in describing a group of people. The addition of "lost" in the room's label made me think of the earliest anthropologists who conducted ethnographic fieldwork out of the belief that certain cultures, namely that of indigenous people, would soon disappear. Rather than accepting that all cultures change, they treated

this disappearance as a negative occurrence. Through their desperation to salvage and maintain traditional culture, these anthropologists perpetuated the idea of the noble savage, the so-called soon-to-be-lost native who would be tainted by Western influences. I have interpreted this sign from my particular anthropological training, but I expect that the public has a spectrum of other interpretations.

Similar to the “lost temple of the primitives”, once (and perhaps still) displayed at the odditorium in London, U.K. was a room labeled as the “hall of exotica” (luke4smith 2014). The sign for this room says: “Explore strange cultures and exotic rituals from the dense jungles of Zanzibar to the mysterious valleys of the Punjab” (luke4smith 2014). The video quality was such that I could not distinguish what exhibits were in here, though it is clear what part of the world Ripley’s is associating with exotica. Zanzibar in Africa and Punjab in India are places that would be categorized as non-Western. Non-Western places were the focus of the earliest anthropology wherein the natives were simultaneously presented as noble savages on the verge of losing their culture to the Western white folk or as uncontrollable, uncivilized people in need of the white man’s purported civilizing beliefs and behaviors. Anthropology has since taken steps to be aware of not presenting the people of their studies in these ways and the discipline no longer studies only non-Western people. The labeling of exotica seems to be a linguistic technique that Ripley’s uses to sensationalize these people. The public might have seen how people in Zanzibar and Punjab live now, but Ripley’s attempts to fight any notions of modernity and living in current times through the label of them as exotica, thus emphasizing their Otherness.

The landscape in the hall of exotica is even sensationalized by emphasizing the jungle as “dense” and the valleys as “mysterious” which again harkens to the earliest

anthropology and travelogues wherein foreign people seemed only reachable through risky adventures and dangerous landscapes. This language ultimately works to sensationalize and exoticize the people of Zanzibar and Punjab; it is almost as if it still takes the courage and nobility of adventurous and brave souls to confront the exoticness of these faraway people and their harsh environments.

#### 4.10 *“Believe It or Not!” and Authenticity Discourse*

Other potential linguistic techniques of constructing Otherness are the repetitive use of their famous phrase “Believe It or Not!” and the labeling of exhibits as authentic or genuine. The idiom “Believe It or Not!” is found on the informational panels of most exhibits and reiterates that what the audience is witnessing is so uncanny that it is hard to believe (Gaines 2002). I have often overheard visitors ask each other whether they “believe it or not” after viewing an exhibit as if Ripley’s was challenging them to make a guess if the exhibit is real. Many visitors responded that they did not believe in certain exhibits, and thus it seems that people are taking the phrase literally in that they actually do think that Ripley’s is trying to fool them with fake exhibits. Ripley’s, however, purports that unless otherwise mentioned, each exhibit is indeed true. Thus, the popular phrase plays a role in accentuating the authenticity of the objects. Regarding the phrase’s meaning, Ed Meyer said:

“No matter what you (the viewer) think, how hard it might be to believe, if our name is on it (and we don’t say it is a replica) it is all true, and all real...the phrase is often perceived as an escape hatch, but it is in fact our seal of approval, if we display it in our odditoriums, say it on our tv shows, or show it in our books, and say Believe It or Not! you can in fact believe it” (Meyer, interview, May 2015).

The phrase “believe it or not” has become common in U.S. lingo and is usually used as a phrase to introduce a true fact. For example, the phrase can be found on websites about photography, back pain, and pet behavior.

A spectacle has been made out of non-believers, most famously Wayne Harbour, who is billed by Ripley’s as “the man who refused to believe.” The odditoriums commonly display letters that Harbour wrote from 1943-1972 to several people in an attempt to prove Ripley’s as wrong (Gatlinburg Odditorium 2015). It seems that all people are at risk for being made into a Believe It or Not! and that Ripley’s is using the case of Harbour to set an example that other visitors ought to believe what they display.

Authenticity is an important factor in how an object’s value and status is determined. Authenticity became a concern as a result of the easy reproduction of material and visual culture by technological inventions. Since copies of art can now be reproduced to look highly identical to the original, the question of authenticity is of particular concern in the art and museum sphere. As Benjamin suggested, reproductions are thought to not be imbued with the same “aura” as the original. Benjamin discusses the original as having a unique essence that cannot be transmitted (Benjamin 1936).

A synthesis of authenticity theory suggests that this unique essence is imbued in an object through having a direct relationship to the creator who had particular meaning and function in mind for that object (Benjamin 1936; Geary 1986; Handler 1986; Lindholm 2002; Spooner 1986). Authenticity based on object-creator relationship can have a scale of values depending on the authority or talent of the creator. Moreover, authenticity can be based on the cultural context, meaning, function, and mode of production in which the object was made. Objects that were directly made with a special purpose and meaning are

considered authentic over reproductions that are thought to be produced with no direct connection to the original's purpose and meaning. Objects produced by capitalistic modes of production are often viewed as less valuable than those handmade due to the indirect relationships of mass production in capitalism. Other factors of authenticity include age and the lived history of the object. Memorial objects, for example, are viewed with a special reverence because of their tie to certain people and events from history. Endurance through changes of ownership and events in history imbues an object with a sacred aura (Benjamin 1936; Geary 1986; Handler 1986; Lindholm 2002; Spooner 1986). Ripley's authenticity discourse bestows the objects with a special status that allows them to then be perceived as out-of-the-ordinary.

The marketing of authenticity plays a prominent role at Ripley's as "authentic" and "genuine" are frequently used to describe the artifacts. Meyer says that Ripley's uses this language in order to highlight that these objects are indeed real and not replicas. He said that they use this language usually on those artifacts that are commonly doubted by the viewers (Meyer, interview, May 2015). To prove the authenticity of exhibits, Ripley's regularly hangs certificates of authenticity throughout the odditoriums. In Gatlinburg, they hung a certificate of authenticity regarding the world's largest gum wrapper chain that was made into a rug. The certificate is signed by the person who measured the gum wrapper chain, verifying that it is as long as claimed. Another certificate of authenticity asserts that Ripley's piece of fabric from the Kitty Hawk flyer of Orville Wright is indeed the original. Finally, Ripley's displays a certificate authenticating a lock of George Washington's hair.

Despite Ripley's claim for authenticity, a few exhibits provoked suspicion. For example, in several of the odditoriums, "the world's rarest egg" is displayed. The egg is

supposed to be an extremely rare elephant bird egg which is 183 times bigger than a regular-sized chicken egg. I did not question the existence of elephant bird eggs as much as I wondered why all of these eggs looked so similar in the odditoriums. It seemed to me like they were replicas of the actual egg discovered, but there is no indication of that in the information panel. Though it is important as an anthropologist to try and research as neutrally as possible, my goal was to also experience the odditoriums like other visitors. It was difficult then to suppress my questions and confusion regarding some of the exhibits like the elephant bird egg.

One commentator on a YouTube video of the odditorium in South Korea critiqued modes of display at Ripley's (I edited the statement's grammar):

“I personally think that they should actually have some record of their claims (like a photograph or video) since drawings and a name just doesn't cut it. I remember their 'death touch' debacle when the local news agency debunked it...how effective would it be if history museums only had a recently drawn picture instead of reproduction props, documents, figures, etc?” (Steve Miller's YouTube channel 2011)

This comment seems to fall into the history in which photographs and video were perceived to be an objective and true view of reality due to the immediate presence of the subject in front of the camera at the moment of capture (Sturken and Cartwright 2001). Drawings are not as authoritative in the perspective of this person, and it is because of this espoused perspective that it is significant to consider modes of display and their perceived authority. Before taking anthropology courses, I shared a similar perspective as this person. I considered a video or photograph unless obviously tampered with, as a copy of reality and hence a neutral and objective look at the world. Whoever shares this perspective might be more likely to believe that the presentations of people in photographs and videos are the

truth. It was common for Ripley's to display photographs of the artifacts being used within their cultural context or to display photographs of people alongside their wax representation. Perhaps this propensity to show photographs is Ripley's attempt at proving authenticity to visitors who adhere to the same perspective regarding photographic objectivity and truth.

#### *4.11 Other Aspects of Language*

Many of Ripley's exhibits are often described as being "one of the most unusual" in their collection. For instance, in the St. Augustine odditorium, a portrait of John Lennon is drawn using smoke. The information panel describing it says that it is "one of the most unusual 'paintings' in the entire Ripley collection..." In another example but at the Gatlinburg odditorium is an exhibit of dead locusts from a plague in 1860 in California. Ripley's says that it is "one of the most bizarre items in the entire Ripley collection." Anytime a person or object is marketed as "one of the most" in some trait, that person or object is constructed as unique. Moreover, by labeling something or someone as "one of the most," Ripley's is more likely able to dodge accusations of falsity since it is a subjective assessment whether something is considered as being *one* of the worst, the best, the rarest, etc.

We also see a play on language in an exhibit that describes Charles Charlesworth, "the boy who died of old age" (Experimentalfilms123 2010). When I first saw the epithet given to Charles, I thought of the fantasy film *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*. In the film, the main character, Benjamin, looks like an old man at birth, but as he grows older in age, his physical appearance increasingly looks younger. The epithet given to Charles made me think that he had a fantasy-like and mysterious case similar to Benjamin Button.

After reading the information panel, though, the visitor learns that this is not some case of fantasy or mystery, but rather, Charles died from the disease progeria which causes children to have an elderly appearance (Experimentalfilms123 2010). While the disease is indeed rare, by the title claiming that a child died of “old age,” visitors may initially be taken aback and puzzled because “children” and “old age” are usually opposing words.

It is not clear which odditorium in Texas this next YouTube cameraman was at, but an information panel on firewalking provides another example of how Ripley’s uses language to create a sense of fantasy, and consequently, Otherness. The panel said: “Fire walking: holy men of Fiji and Sri Lanka have the power to walk unharmed across hot coals. Can you?” (Punkie282828 2010). These firewalkers are described as *having* the power to do this feat, not as knowing methods of walking across the coals safely. It seems that by attributing a power to the people, it mystifies them and hence presents them as other-worldly in that sense. It does not ground their accomplishments as techniques that they learn and that perhaps any person could learn with time and practice.

#### *4.12 Souvenir Booklets*

Each odditorium sells souvenir booklets that are about forty to fifty pages long and full of pictures and information on some of the exhibits. All of the odditoriums that I visited sold the same two souvenir booklets, one was published in 2013 and the other in 2015. Because the booklets are so extensive, I will only focus on their descriptions of human bodies and “tribal” artifacts as both of those relate to this research’s topical focus. Seeing booklets from two different years will allow a glimpse into how Ripley’s presentation of and language about bodies and non-Western objects might have changed.



Starting with the 2013 booklet, there are two pages dedicated to what Ripley's labels as tribal and primitive artifacts. Interestingly, in some parts of the booklet, the term primitive is put into quotations. For example, the booklet says: "Robert Ripley was fascinated by 'primitive' cultures and their exotic customs" (Ripley Entertainment, Inc. 2013, 30). I have not seen the same use of quotation marks when the word primitive appears in the information panels of their odditoriums. To put quotation marks around it here makes me think that Ripley's is aware of potential misleading connotations from the term and wants to emphasize caution when seeing it used as a descriptor for the cultures discussed.

These pages state that Robert Ripley "traveled to the most remote corners of the world" such as New Guinea, China, India, Fiji, Peru, the Easter Islands, and near the North Pole (Ripley Entertainment, Inc. 2013, 30). In the following list of what Ripley's has displayed on these pages, I will put quotation marks around the names of the exhibits to emphasize that they are the labels given by Ripley's. Shown in this section of the booklet include: "Tibetan skull bowl," "lion-shaped fantasy coffin," "elongated skull from head wrapping," "carved skull," "Asmat cannibal skull," "African hate god," and "human skin mask." Also on this page is information specifically about the fantasy coffins made in Ghana, Africa. All of these objects come from places that historically have been considered as not part of "the West" (Ripley Entertainment, Inc. 2013, 30-31).

Two pages are dedicated to "extreme body modification" in which Eric Sprague and Maria Cristerna are featured. On the page with Sprague, the text says: "Human oddities come in two basic types: those that are born with genetic defects, and those who go to great lengths to modify their bodies" (Ripley Entertainment, Inc. 2013, 40). The word oddities is used here in relation to human bodies, and it should also be noted that both Sprague and

Maria Cristerna are marketed as the world's strangest man and woman. As discussed earlier, the marketing of them as "the strangest" is an attempt at presenting them as unique. Ripley's purpose is to present to the audience what they supposedly cannot witness in their everyday lives. Thus, the marketing of Sprague and Cristerna as unique in that they are allegedly the strangest people alive is an aim at meeting that purpose. To highlight Cristerna's epithet as "vampire woman," she is shown in a pose of preparing to hammer a stake into her heart. Another image of her shows her vampire-like fang implants (Ripley Entertainment, Inc. 2013, 41). Sprague is shown sticking out his forked tongue and with a pair of scissors driven deep into his nose to communicate that he is not only a man trying to transform his body to appear lizard-like, but he also performs stunts as part of his exhibition (Ripley Entertainment, Inc. 2013, 40).

After Sprague and Cristerna, there are pages on "extreme people" (Ripley Entertainment, Inc. 2013, 42-43). As with the adjective primitive, Ripley's put quotation marks around extreme in parts of the text. It is likely that quotations act as a caution against negative connotations that may result from using extreme as a descriptor. In the fashion of binary opposition, persons of opposite height and weight are juxtaposed next to each other on these pages to accentuate their bodily difference. Khagendra Magar from Nepal, who was 18 years old when this booklet was published, is marketed as "one of the shortest" people at twenty-two inches tall. His title here implies that he is not *the* shortest person in recorded history, but Ripley's still tries to highlight the uniqueness of him through saying that he is *one* of the shortest. Encompassing the entire background of the page with Magar is a slightly blurred picture of a model of Robert Wadlow, marketed as the tallest man ever. Magar is holding onto the ruler that is displayed next to Wadlow, implying that the picture

was taken of Magar at one of his visits to Ripley's odditorium (Ripley Entertainment, Inc. 2013, 42).

From this image of Magar with the ruler, the viewer can see that Magar's height is indeed a little under two feet, verifying the written description. Wadlow's legs shoot up past the head of Magar. Both Wadlow and Magar's height are highlighted through their positioning next to each other. On the next page is an explication of the "1400 lb. man," Walter Hudson. His wax figure is shown with a list of what he could eat in a day on average. Magar is shown again next to Hudson with a caption that says Hudson's daily diet is enough to feed Magar for nine months. Ripley's is emphasizing the weight of Hudson through the opposite diet of Magar (Ripley Entertainment, Inc. 2013, 43).

Pages about "real body oddities" and "cultural body oddities" follow the information on Wadlow, Hudson, and Magar. Some of the figures shown on the page that says "real body oddities" include the "mule faced woman" (Grace McDaniels), "wolf girl", an unidentified figure whose face is completely covered in hair, "the 'unicorn' man of china," "the Gurner," (J.T Saylor who in other Ripley's media has been referred to as "Rubber Face"), and Jalisa Thompson who can pop her eyes out of their socket. The page's text says: "Showcasing some of the most bizarre and weird folks that Robert Ripley ever found on his travels, a modern collection of wax figures is central to the world of Ripley's" (Ripley Entertainment, Inc. 2013, 44). This page mostly seems to cover bodies that have been affected by genetic disorders.

The next page on "cultural body oddities" discusses body modification that is rooted within particular cultural traditions, such as the practice of Padaung women who use brass coil rings to create the appearance that their necks are stretched. Another example

of a so-called cultural body oddity are women from the Sara group in Chad, Africa who extend their lips through the insertion of wood plates (Ripley Entertainment, Inc. 2013, 45). While outside of the thesis's scope, Ripley's also has two pages dedicated to "animal oddities" that includes animals who were born with genetic mutations. Therefore, "oddity" is not an adjective only used regarding people.

The booklet published in 2015 also has a section on "tribal and primitive artifacts" and "human oddities." One difference of the 2015 booklet overall is that it has more cartoon and animated images in conjunction with the actual photos of objects and people. The text on the purported tribal and primitive objects is mostly the same as what was written in the 2013 edition. The only difference is Ripley's uses the terminology of "indigenous groups" rather than "primitive cultures" when referring to people in New Guinea, Fiji, the Congo, etc. Primitive is not found in quotation marks anywhere on this page, but perhaps they decided to address the issue by labeling them as indigenous groups instead. If that is the case, though, it begs the question of why they still used "primitive" in the title of the section (Ripley Entertainment, Inc. 2015, 28-29).

Other than the incorporation of text and images about fantasy coffins, the other images are different from the 2013 edition. Here we see objects that are given more general names such as "dance mask" and "tribal mask." There is a cartoon drawing of a snake charmer that says that the Vadi people of India teach their children how to charm snakes starting at the age of two. Finally, there is a cartoon image of a boy with a distended stomach that says the Bodi group of Ethiopia have a competition to see who can grow the fattest stomach by drinking the blood and milk of cows. Regarding this section then, the

content is quite different from the 2013 version other than the discussion of fantasy coffins and the list of places Ripley's traveled (Ripley Entertainment, Inc. 2015, 29).

The information and images of human bodies are condensed down to two pages. Ripley's introduces the featured people with a more thorough introduction: "From genetic abnormalities to extreme body modification, Ripley's celebrates all human oddities, marvels, and everything abnormally extraordinary. Some of the rarest human peculiarities are immortalized in wax figures including Lizardman, Vampire Woman and the world's tallest man!" (Ripley Entertainment, Inc. 2015, 32). It appears that Ripley's is trying to communicate that they appreciate diversity by saying that they celebrate human oddities, though I expect that readers and other researchers could potentially have different interpretations of the usage of "celebration."

All of the figures shown on these two pages were displayed in the 2013 booklet on human bodies. Magar is shown standing next to Wadlow with a vantage point that captures the full bodies of both figures, allowing the comparison of heights to be easier than the 2013 version. Ripley's also included the heights and weights of Wadlow and Magar to accentuate the difference with more than just visuals (Ripley Entertainment, Inc. 33).

Both the 2013 and 2015 booklet contains an entire section dedicated to discussing shrunken heads within the context of Jivaro culture in South America. This section talks about the belief system behind the shrinking of heads and a step-by-step guide to how shrunken heads were made. In this case, Ripley's is trying to dispel any mystery by revealing the science behind the shrinking of heads, and they want odditorium visitors to understand the Jivaro reasoning for taking part in such a practice. In the next chapter, I will

talk more about Ripley's presentation of shrunken heads (Ripley Entertainment, Inc. 2013, 28-29; Ripley Entertainment, Inc. 2015, 26-27).

#### *4.13 Conclusion*

Overall, Ripley's entertainment is founded on the play with boundaries and tensions. I discussed earlier in this chapter how they blur the boundary between fact and fiction with the play on fictional and historical references and by constructing fictionalized landscapes that are based on true situations (like plane crashes and sinkholes). Additionally in tiptoeing along the boundary of real and fake, Ripley's displays real artifacts and frequently emphasizes their authenticity while much of their entertainment stems from illusions and foolery. In particular, their wax figures and replicas, as artificial representations of real people and things, are the ultimate exemplars of this tension between real and fake. Wax figures, for example, are artificial in nature but are known for their ability to trick people with their realism. As an institution of "edutainment," Ripley's also aims to blur the boundary between education and entertainment. Through the reverse gaze, Ripley's challenges our notions of the world while in other moments they reinforce them.

The material and linguistic analyses in this chapter are a product of my own interpretation, filtered through my theoretical agenda, educational background, and other experiences. I argued that the exhibits at Ripley's are not inherently strange and Other, but rather, Ripley's constructs them that way through advertisements, exterior and interior decoration, spatial arrangement, and the repetitive usage of certain phrases and descriptors. I have proposed various connotations that visitors might have of Ripley's usage of adjectives like "primitive" and "savage," but without an in-depth reception study, I can only infer possibilities. Also, without a future reception study, I can only speculate how

visitors' notions of cultural and physical differences are influenced by their interpretations of Ripley's exhibits. In the next chapter, I further exemplify my argument about how Ripley's constructs Otherness through the case studies of two popular exhibits: the wax model of Grace McDaniels and Ripley's famous African fertility statues. In Chapter Six in which I discuss the results of surveys, reviews, and interviews from a select group of Ripley's audience members and employees, I will continue examining the complexity of interpretation.



Figure 4.1 The spinning tunnel at the Gatlinburg, Tennessee auditorium. Photo taken by the author, June 2015.





Figure 4.2 Wax figure of “the Skeleton Dude” at the St. Augustine, Florida odditorium. Photo by the author, July 2015.



Figure 4.3 Wax figure of Robert Wadlow at Gatlinburg, Tennessee odditorium. Photo by the author, June 2015.



Figure 4.4 Wax figure of Robert Earl Hughes at the St. Augustine, Florida odditorium. Photo taken by the author, July 2015.



Figure 4.5 Photo op with the body of Robert Earl Hughes at the Gatlinburg, Tennessee odditorium. Photo by author, June 2015.





Figure 4.6 Wax figure of Walter Hudson at the St. Augustine, Florida odditorium. Photo by the author, July 2015.



Figure 4.7 Wax figures at the Myrtle Beach, South Carolina odditorium. Photos taken by the author, July 2015.

## CHAPTER 5

### CASE STUDIES

#### *5.1 Introduction*

In this chapter, I apply the material, spatial, and linguistic analysis from the previous chapters to two specific case studies. The first section analyzes how Ripley's agenda of communicating Otherness is advanced through the materiality and decoration of a wax figure made in the likeness of Grace McDaniels, who was a sideshow performer from the 1930s to the 1950s. I also incorporate commentary from YouTube videos, blogs, and odditorium reviews regarding Ripley's representation of McDaniels to illustrate the spectrum of opinions that the audience has about this exhibit. The commentary shows that some audience members challenge Ripley's emphasis on the Otherness of McDaniels whereas other commentators further the message of Otherness through jokes of their own. In the second section, I utilize an object biographical approach and mediation theory in order to discuss how a pair of statues were transplanted from an African context into an American one and transformed into being a globally circulated and technologically mediated fertility aid and museum exhibit. Both case studies exemplify the techniques that Ripley's uses to construe artifacts, bodies, and cultures as strange, unbelievable, and shocking.

## *5.2 Grace McDaniels: Immortalized in Wax*

My personal encounter with the McDaniels model took place at Ripley's odditorium in Orlando, Florida where she was given the epithet of "mule-faced woman." Other Ripley's odditoriums label her as "the world's ugliest woman." In McDaniels' career as a sideshow performer, the public and her managers referred to her using both epithets. Many current descriptions of her that are circulating among the public claim that she was born with an extreme case of Sturge-Weber's syndrome which is a skin disorder that causes prominent port-wine stain birthmarks on the face (e.g. Austin 2016; Pednaud 2015). However, Ripley's official website state that she suffered from Elephantiasis, defined as the enlargement of body parts caused by obstructions of the lymphatic vessels (Ripley Entertainment, Inc. 2016f). These medical speculations stem from the appearance of her lips as protruding and noticeably swollen-looking. Before even activating her exhibit, the Otherness of McDaniels is communicated by her epithets because to look like a mule and to be the ugliest person in the world conveys the message that she deviates from beauty norms.

In the Orlando museum, McDaniels is displayed in a room with wax models and photographs representing other past people who were deemed to be deviant enough for showcasing due to their bodily conditions or abilities. Interactions with the material environment of Ripley's and with other exhibits has guided the visitors to think about Otherness by the time they see the McDaniels figure. These surrounding exhibits with their bodies on display provide the additional context that pushes viewers into focusing on the Otherness of McDaniels' body.



Otherness in the case of McDaniels is communicated in two steps: one step is through the initial disconcerting interaction with her wax figure because of the realism, and the second step is through the invitation to compare her to other women that then emphasizes her appearance as deviating from the norm. First, Ripley's has attempted to make the wax representation of McDaniels strongly resemble her actual photos by making the model life-sized, by depicting her pores and making them look clogged with makeup, by making her skin look flush with pink hues, by adding birthmarks and moles, by dressing her in an outfit that replicates what she wore in the sideshow, and by carefully sculpting the disfigured portions of her face to realistically match her skin disorder.

When I visited the McDaniels exhibit, several visitors were commenting on the realism of the room's wax models, and children asked the adults if the figures were real. Recall that in Chapter Four, I discussed how the realism of wax figures consigns them to an in-between category of seemingly not quite object but not quite human either. I also talked about the human-animal nicknames that would be given to sideshow performers to construct them as other, not quite human but not an animal either. By Ripley's continually referring to her as "mule-faced woman" like she was when she was alive and performing in sideshows, her identity is maintained in an ambiguous category.

The second step of constructing Otherness is achieved by placing McDaniels within a mock kissing booth that is constructed out of wood and painted with red and white vertical stripes. To avoid a misunderstanding, "kissing booth" is painted at the top of the exhibit. The model of McDaniels stands at around five feet and four inches and fits comfortably in the kissing booth that is about six to seven feet tall. As the viewer first approaches her exhibit, McDaniels is facing toward the back of the booth, and it is dark inside. The exhibit

is activated when the visitor places his or her hand onto a plaque that has a handprint carved into it. When activated, the lights inside the booth turn on, and the McDaniels model slowly starts to turn around to reveal her face to the audience. While turning to face the viewer, the song “Don’t Cha” by the Pussycat Dolls plays:

Don’t cha wish your girlfriend was hot like me?  
Don’t cha wish your girlfriend was a freak like me?  
Don’t cha?  
Don’t cha?...

The kissing booth is commonly depicted in current popular culture such as television shows, films, and online social media (e.g. The Digi60’s channel 2012; Solarski 2008; Warner Bros. TV 2011). Women are displayed in kissing booths more often than men, but I have not found any media that presents women with similar medical conditions as McDaniels as the subject of the kissing booth. In American popular culture in general, people with facial deformities are not usually presented as figures who attract romantic and sexual attention. Likewise, celebrities are frequently considered ideal men and women regarding beauty, but there are few, if any, celebrities with noticeable physical conditions like McDaniels.

Hence, I argue that it was the intention of Ripley’s to present McDaniels in the kissing booth because they are aware that she does not have the appearance of a woman that is prevalently expected to be in one. Ripley’s assumes that the popular media and celebrity images of beauty will be accepted as the norm here, but McDaniels is not meeting that expectation. It is the shock and irony of seeing McDaniels in the booth that accentuates her as deviating from the beauty norm and successively as being Other. In an online review of the Orlando odditorium, a commentator said that Grace’s exhibit was not appropriate. A manager responded to say that Grace’s figure is presented in a kissing booth at Ripley’s

because she reportedly was displayed like that in the sideshow when she was alive. The manager states that it is not Ripley's intention to make fun of Grace, but rather, to celebrate her differences (TripAdvisor 2014, Orlando Odditorium). Nonetheless, even if Ripley's was only trying to be true to how she was exhibited in the sideshow, they still made the choice to add the song that I, along with numerous other viewers, have interpreted as taking the mocking further.

Ripley's added the song to ensure that the Otherness of McDaniels is communicated. The viewer is expected to find it satirical that a woman of Grace's appearance would be displayed with a song that says: "Don't cha wish your girlfriend was hot like me...Don't cha wish your girlfriend was a freak like me." Within the context of the song, "hot" and "freak" have the connotation of physical and sexual attractiveness. In current American lingo, usually a freak in bed refers to someone who is a sex enthusiast, and to be a freak in bed is portrayed in popular media as a desirable quality in women. The viewer is expected to think that it funny and ironic that the adjectives hot and freak are used to describe McDaniels whose appearance does not match women who are shown as receivers of sexual attention in the media. Her Otherness is highlighted within this moment of irony. It seems that there is a double meaning because "freak" is also the term that was used and is still used to label sideshow performers because it is synonymous with "abnormal." Either interpretation of the term communicates McDaniels as Other. After showing herself to the viewer for about ten seconds, the wax figure of McDaniels rotates around to face the back of the booth once again, the lights turn off, and the song stops playing.

At the Orlando odditorium, no information about McDaniel's career, medical condition, or personality is provided. This lack of information directs the viewer to solely think about her appearance. The viewer can only interpret her through Ripley's presentation of her body and through her label as "mule-faced woman." Without talking about her medical condition, Ripley's misses the chance to educate the public about the disorder and about how society is responsible for assigning her the status of ugly and deviant. Other Ripley's odditoriums provide more information on her, but the language of the information still conveys the Otherness of McDaniels. In their London museum, the informational panel on McDaniels says:

"The World's Ugliest Woman? As the 'Mule-Faced Woman', sideshow performer Grace McDaniels had a warm spirit and delightful personality. Though viewers fainted at the sight of her, she received numerous proposals of marriage, finally accepting one (and bearing a normal son)! View her alarming countenance at your own risk by pushing the button" (Levertps3fan 2011).

By talking about how viewers would faint at the sight of McDaniels and that it is a risk to witness her "alarming" countenance, Ripley's is perpetuating her status as ugly. Additionally, McDaniels is by default ascribed "abnormal" status when it is said that she gave birth to a "normal" son. The viewer is expected to find irony regarding the description of McDaniels' ugly appearance in juxtaposition to her receiving marriage proposals. Likewise, it becomes clear again how Ripley's relies on binary oppositions to emphasize Otherness as they talk about her supposedly pleasant personality despite her physical ugliness. In summarizing a discussion by Leslie Fiedler, Adams (2001) states that juxtaposing opposite qualities of allure and repulsion was a common technique that sideshows would use when describing the performers. Thus, here again, the sideshow

legacy of constructing Otherness can be found in Ripley's (Adams 2001, 204; Fiedler 1993).

Even though not all Ripley's odditoriums present McDaniels in a kissing booth, they attempt to communicate her Otherness in various ways such as in informational panels, as previously discussed, and in accentuating her facial deformity through makeup. For instance, at Ripley's odditorium in New York, only the upper torso and head of McDaniels is displayed inside a glass case. Unlike the Orlando odditorium, here her lips are colored purple and black to appear bruised. Like a bruise signals injury, coloring her lips in this way highlights that they are problematic and not normal. This discoloring also has the effect of drawing attention to the size of her lips.

Since most sources that I have found about McDaniels are of people's interactions with her wax figure at Ripley's, Ripley's has a significant role in disseminating information about McDaniels. In Google searches of McDaniels, a significant number of results are about Ripley's exhibition of her, and in my experience, these websites overwhelm the amount of sites about her actual life. We are bombarded then with Ripley's interpretation and representation of her life, and it is possible that Ripley's is the public's first and last source of information about McDaniels. Therefore, it is important to investigate how people are interpreting and interacting with her wax figure at Ripley's to see if the message of Otherness is actually communicated.

A majority of my analysis on interactions with McDaniels is based from videos of visits to Ripley's museums that were uploaded to YouTube. Other sources of data include blogs, social media such as Facebook and Flickr, and commentary to the YouTube videos. I only observed a few people express sympathy for McDaniels and critique how Ripley's

presents her. Most commentary that I found indicate that people agree with her presentation as ugly.

Beginning with critiques of Ripley's, when I visited the Orlando museum I overheard a man say that he liked all of the exhibits except for the McDaniels one. He said that the exhibit was very mean, and the woman he was with agreed. Another man verges on questioning Ripley's presentation of McDaniels in a YouTube video when he reveals that Ripley's has continued to market her as "the world's ugliest woman" which was an epithet that McDaniels reportedly hated when she was alive (Blackheads Under the Microscope 2015). The man states that he finds it sad that people with medical problems were displayed in freak shows, but his video overall does not strongly challenge Ripley's assertion of McDaniels as ugly and mule-faced. However, he does ask in the video if the viewers feel sorry for McDaniels in which about eight out of eighty-five comments to the video express sympathy for her and do not agree with her description as ugly. One person posted several comments to this video that claims that McDaniels never married as Ripley's and many other sources about her report, but rather, she was raped by a fellow sideshow worker which resulted in the birth of her son. I have only found two online posts that also talked about the rape of McDaniels (Documenting Reality Forum 2009; S.D. 2013). Though I did not find proof that this actually happened to her, it seems as if these commentators were trying to detract negative attention from her appearance and instead focus on aspects of her life that never become voiced because people are mostly concerned with her looks.

There was one source that in some ways challenged Ripley's but perpetuated the Otherness of McDaniels in different ways. The blog narrates an experience at a Ripley's odditorium:

“Jessica presses another button and a waxwork of Grace McDaniels, the ‘mule-faced woman’ spins around to reveal her hideous and unfortunate facial deformity...there is a historical element which is acceptable for a museum to explore, but I doubt whether Grace McDaniels would imagine that her miserable life would be celebrated by a waxwork that spins. Anywhere that showcases people who have led a terrible existence simply because of the way they look, is treading a thin line” (Kennedy 2012).

Here, McDaniels is still characterized as an Other in appearance through the description of her face as “hideous” and “unfortunate”, but the blog's writer questions whether it is ethical for Ripley's and other museums to display such people.

A final form of challenging Ripley's presentation of McDaniels is through the reinvention of her image in art and songs. One man posted his drawing of McDaniels online in which he received comments that his depiction of McDaniels was beautiful and that he successfully portrayed her as dignified yet emotionally in pain (Mundie 2010). This interpretation seems to be what the artist hoped for as he writes about the hardships McDaniels faced with her son Elmer who was allegedly abusive to her. His art does not evoke any commentary about her being ugly. For a second example, the band Sangsara has written a song called “Grace McDaniels” that talks about life in the sideshow, but there is no description of her as ugly or mule-faced. Instead, the lyrics at the end of the song say: “...wanna be beautiful like you...” Furthermore, the musicians state that the song is about inner beauty (Sangsara 2015). Sangsara's song does not offer any negative attention to her

physical appearance which would otherwise still communicate Otherness by detracting from the focus on personality.

The people who did not challenge the Otherness of McDaniels made jokes about her, often using references to other figures in popular culture or espousing evolutionary views. In a YouTube video, a man pretends to lean in to kiss the McDaniels wax figure and refers to it as “the kiss of death” (The One 2014). In other videos of people interacting with her wax figure, commentators would joke that the man who McDaniels bore a son with must have been drunk, and one person in particular said, “if this lady can get laid and have a son, then there isn’t a single female on this planet who should have any problem finding a man.” Several people expressed disgust at seeing McDaniels by responding “yuck” or by responding similarly to one person who said, “I was eating food while watching this...BIG mistake...” (Blackheads Under the Microscope 2015). Harkening to the days of the earliest sideshows in which the people displayed were thought to be inferior and less evolved, contemporary viewers have expressed evolutionary opinions regarding McDaniels. One person said, “so there’s where the missing link was hiding,” and another viewer commented that McDaniels looks like an early human ancestor and that her skull should be scientifically checked to confirm (Blackheads Under the Microscope 2015; Legend of Wayne 2014). Even if the commentators are only joking, to talk about McDaniels as an early human hominid relegates her to the category of primitive, inferior, and Other.

Finally, many people commented that it looks like McDaniels failed the Kylie Jenner challenge. Kylie Jenner is an American model and television personality who is thought beautiful for her big and pouty lips. People who have undertaken techniques to try and make their lips big and beautiful like Kylie are said to have attempted the Kylie Jenner



challenge. These people often become the center of negative attention as the techniques to make big and beautiful lips may result in lips that look unnaturally swollen and distended (Blackheads Under the Microscope 2015; thecreaturehub 2015). To joke that McDaniels failed the Kylie Jenner challenge is equal to saying that she does not have attractive lips.

The McDaniels figure was one that I felt most drawn to as it evoked the strongest negative reaction from me out of all of Ripley's exhibits. I have spent substantial time reflecting on why I reacted in this way and what would have influenced me to interpret the McDaniels exhibit as I have in this chapter. I concluded that my interpretation and reaction are most likely the result of my experiences with low self-esteem and anorexia as a young teenager in which I too felt like a spectacle of ugliness because of my body. Knowing the long-term effects that an eating disorder and low self-esteem have, the case of McDaniels and the focus on bodies in general in this thesis is important to me because I have wondered what impressions that presenting people in the way that Ripley's does have on young viewers. More specifically, how does being an edutainment business in which there is the mix of entertainment with education influence the way viewers come to think of the world outside of the institution?

I am not using my reactions here as a claim that what Ripley's is doing is unethical, and I certainly do not want to arouse negative feelings towards the company's employees. I will, however, discuss ethical considerations in Chapter Seven with the hope that readers will form their own opinions and questions about the display of bodies. Generally, my experiences at Ripley's odditoriums were positive, and I was amazed at all the ways that Ripley's seems to encourage viewers to appreciate difference and not think so

ethnocentrically about their own cultures. I encourage all readers to visit the odditoriums and to view the media themselves to form their own opinions about the exhibits.

### *5.3 Fertility Statues: From Decoration to Global Sensation*

A pair of fertility statues, owned by Ripley's, is currently on a world tour in which they are temporarily displayed at several of their odditoriums located globally. According to Ripley's, the statues stand at about five feet tall and were allegedly carved out of ebony wood in approximately 1930 by Baule artisans in the Ivory Coast of Africa. One of the statues appears to be female and holds a baby whereas the other statue appears to be a male holding a sword and some type of fruit. Ripley's states that the fertility statues would have been positioned in the bedroom of a Baule couple, and if either statue was touched, the couple would conceive (Ripley Entertainment, Inc. 2016g).

Ripley's acquired the statues in 1993 and originally intended that they be decorations in their company headquarters. However, within a year, thirteen employees claimed to have conceived a child shortly after touching the statues. The media was quick to catch wind of these women's stories, and soon, women from around the world were traveling over hundreds of miles for a chance to touch the statues. Because so many women were visiting the statues, Ripley's had to move them to their Orlando odditorium so that operations at the headquarters could continue to run without interruption. Women who could not make the journey to Orlando demanded that Ripley's send the statues to the other odditoriums around the world (Meyer, interview, July 2015).

In 2015, the statues started their fourth world tour in which they are temporarily displayed at the various Ripley's locations; between tours, they are displayed at the Orlando odditorium. While other exhibits might be moved among the odditoriums at some

point in their lives at Ripley's, I have only seen the company set tour schedules for the fertility statues due to public demand. It also seems that the fertility statues have been moved the most and have visited the most odditoriums out of all of the exhibits. The statues are exhibited in the lobby of the odditoriums which allows women to touch the statues for free. Still, some women are unable to physically visit the statues, so Ripley's offers the service of rubbing articles of clothing and photographed or faxed handprints on the statues (Meyer, interview, July 2015).

Due to the changing ownership and statuses of the statues, object biography as discussed by Kopytoff (1986) and Zeitlin (2009) is a useful approach to talk about how Ripley's is able to transform these statues from an African fertility aid into a global odditorium exhibit (Kopytoff 1986; Zeitlin 2009). Mediation theory adds to the discussion of the statues' transformation by drawing our attention to how the statues have become mediated in technological spaces (Bolter and Grusin 1999). Finally, conversations of object agency, particularly from Hoskins (2006) and Zeitlin (2009), can be applied to learn how these statues have played a role in constituting the biographies of other Ripley's artifacts and of people who come into contact with the statues (Hoskins 2006; Zeitlin 2009).

Kopytoff (1986) is acknowledged as being one of the first theorists to suggest that objects should be analyzed as having life biographies like people, and other scholars have since applied this methodology to their studies in archaeology, materiality, and commoditization (Appadurai 1986; Geary 1986; Gosden and Marshall 1999; Meskell 2004; Joy 2009; Spooner 1986). Like people, objects should not be viewed as having fixed identities, but rather, through the variety of life stages and cultural contexts that they pass through, their statuses change. Kopytoff focuses on two statuses, that of commoditization

and of singularization (Kopytoff 1986). As Appadurai and Kopytoff (1986) note, commoditization has been a contested term, but a commodity is generally considered to be anything or anyone in which there is an attached exchange and use value and that can be exchanged monetarily or directly with other commodities (Appadurai 1986; Kopytoff 1986). An object in the state of commoditization is treated as having an exchange value and thus being available for sale whereas singularization is the state of not being available for sale. Kopytoff states that every culture has things that are guarded against entering the sphere of the commodity, either based on extreme worth or on extreme worthlessness. Often those things regarded as extremely worthy are valued to the extent of being treated as having a sacred power (Kopytoff 1986).

Yet, commoditization and singularization are not completely exclusive statuses but are rather more a continuum of possible states that a thing can continuously pass between. What at one time and within one cultural context is considered a singularized item to be protected from commoditization can later enter the commodity sphere and vice versa through a process called diversion. Prolonged singularization can increase a thing's exchange value for later commoditization by gaining prestige via factors like age, sacredness, succession of ownership, and perceived authenticity. Likewise, a high monetary value can lead to the desire to maintain the object in a state of singularization (Kopytoff 1986).

For example, cars can gain more monetary value over time as they become categorized as antiques which then may spur the buyer to prolong the car in a state of singularization until the distant future when the car has a higher value. The car in this case was once in a state of commoditization and then moved into an extended state of

singularization only to be moved back into the commodity sphere. At any time during singularization, the car has the potential for entering commoditization. Interestingly, Kopytoff discusses how the state of being “priceless” doubly means that the object is prized as singular and as a commodity. An object treated as priceless is often singularized and treated with much care while in that state, but the “pricelessness” of the object signals that it is of remarkably high commodity value (Kopytoff 1986).

Because Kopytoff’s approach illuminates the shifting cultural contexts of an object from its manufacture to “death,” it is useful for revealing when and how an object is presented by Ripley’s as a Believe It or Not! In the case of Ripley’s fertility statues, they may have been created for use within a couple’s home to ensure fertility, or it is possible that the statues were originally created for a tourist market and perhaps never initially used as fertility aids. Either way, it is probable that the statues were used and displayed in a private context before they were acquired by Ripley’s. Edward Meyer told me that he bought the statues from an individual in Florida who he would not specify any more details of (Meyer, interview, July 2015). While I cannot be certain how many stages of singularization and commoditization that the statues have experienced before Meyer’s acquisition of the statues, they were commoditized in the transaction between Meyer and the individual from whom the statues were bought from. They have been in a singularized state at Ripley’s since, but they always have the potential to enter commoditization once again if Ripley’s ever decides to sell them.

Even still, the objects are not wholly singular as they are indirectly used as a marketing ploy for the company. While the statues are placed in the lobbies of the odditoriums so that hopeful parents can touch them for free, it is hoped that the hype of the

statues will attract these visitors to pay to see the rest of the odditorium. According to Meyer, the statues are their most popular exhibit, and with their worldwide coverage in television shows, news programs, and all over the internet and on radio, it is likely that people become interested in the rest of Ripley's media and exhibits because of these statues (Meyer, interview, July 2015). As the statues gain more fame through increasing testimonies of their powers, I imagine their commodity value increases as does their "pricelessness" in the sense that Ripley's probably would refuse to sell them. Pricelessness is synonymous with being one-of-its-kind which harkens to my analysis of authenticity discourse as important for marketing an object as strange and unbelievable.

Just as people have changing roles in their personal and career lives, the use values of the statues have changed over time. Perhaps in their African context they were fertility statues or a collector's item, but then later in their lives, they became office decoration and ultimately an exhibit and a fertility aid for women across the globe. Additionally, the statues experience shifting states of mobility and immobility. When they are on a world tour, they change locations frequently, but they are otherwise more permanently housed at the Orlando odditorium. These statues are treated much like bands and celebrities who frequently go on world tours and are always on the move. Like celebrities, whenever these statues are in town, the local news stations feature them as does businesses on occasion. For instance, a hotel in Baltimore offered a "baby-making" special that included tickets and transportation to the local Ripley's odditorium when the statues were housed there on their most recent world tour. The hotel said that if a couple could show proof of conception shortly after their trip to the statues, the hotel would fund and host the baby's one-year birthday party (Dacey 2015).

The statues exemplify Marx's (1867) concept of commodity fetishism in which objects are treated as if they are inherently valuable like people. The concern with commodity fetishism is that because objects are often regarded as having such natural value, the process of labor behind their production is forgotten and so are the human laborers involved (Marx 1867). It is thought then that unsafe work conditions and unfair wages will persist. Celebrities and artists are often treated as if they have some type of innate and genius ability and are thus held in the highest esteem. With the statues taking on this celebrity-like status, they too are treated as innately valuable, and consequently, the process of labor behind their production is disregarded. This commodity fetishism though is what makes the statues worthy for Ripley's odditoriums; they are construed as one-of-a-kind for their purported magical abilities.

Zeitlin's biographical approach critiques Kopytoff's because she says that he lacked examining people's personal attachment to objects and subsequently how this relationship impacts the object's identity (Zeitlin 2009). The initial testimonies of the statues' powers impacted their identities by removing them from the sphere of decoration into the public sphere of being a fertility aid and museum exhibit. While remaining a potential commodity should Ripley's ever decide to sell the statues, they are currently singularized because Ripley's does not want to capitalize on women's fertility issues. Furthermore, Zeitlin commemorates Hoskins for noting that people's biographies can become intertwined with objects (Hoskins 2006; Zeitlin 2009). The object biographical approach of Joy (2009) also emphasizes the importance of examining the relationship between object and person in understanding the biographies of both (Joy 2009:543). Hence, Hoskins', Zeitlin's and Joy's particular approach to object biography emphasizes the

importance of objects in the personal lives of people which is relevant to the fertility statues. Thousands of women worldwide have claimed that they became pregnant from the statues' powers, many who were told they would never be able to conceive (Meyer July 2015). Therefore, now these statues are inseparable from the emotionally charged stories of these women's conception difficulties and of their children's births. The women's biographies and their children's have become intertwined with the statues. These statues have been memorialized through pregnancy website forums, letters written to Ripley's, YouTube videos, appearances on television, and testimonials submitted on social media.

In examining personal relationships to the statues, object agency theories reveal how these statues are able to affect the actions and emotions of people and the life trajectories of other Ripley's objects. Hoskins and Zeitlin talk about the charisma or aura of an object: the ability of an object to sway people to certain action and emotion (Hoskins 2006; Zeitlin 2009). People truly believe in the statues' ability to cause conception which in itself illustrates how the statues are thought to be agentive in the world. Moreover, because of this strong belief in their agentive property, people drive long distances, sometimes over 300 miles, to touch the objects (Meyer July 2015). People are planning their daily lives around the statues and are investing money to travel to them. Ripley's displays other similar fertility statues in their odditoriums, but none so far have the same legacy as this pair of statues. In July 2015 though, Ripley's began displaying another set of fertility statues at their Orlando location to see if these statues can build a similar fame. From this, it is clear that the statues have changed the biography of other objects in addition to the biographies and actions of people.



The treatment of Ripley's as a fertility clinic has extended to online spaces as well, specifically to forums about fertility. Women who have tried other fertility treatments with no luck rub and kiss pictures of the statues on their computers and talk to each other about their experiences with Ripley's statues and hopes for visiting them (BabyandBump 2011). The pair of statues is a great example of the various ways that physical objects can become mediated. The statues' image and information about them are now found on radio and television, in photography and video, and through fax and the internet. As in the case of the McDaniels figure, it is likely that the public's notions of African fertility aids are immensely influenced from the mediation of Ripley's statues.

#### *5.4 Conclusion*

As the cases of the McDaniels figure and the fertility statues illustrate, cultures, bodies, and objects are not inherently oddities, curiosities, or Believe It or Nots! The message of Otherness is constructed through choices of exhibit materials, decorations, language, and spatial arrangement. Moreover, the fertility statues show the relational aspect to successfully construct and communicate oddness; women of the general public played the primary role in transforming these statues into Believe It or Nots! They were the ones who demanded that the statues be taken out of the context of being an office decoration and brought to Ripley's limelight. Thus, it should be remembered that the public is not comprised of passive readers of institutional messages, but rather, they are always actively creating their own messages.



Figure 5.1 The kissing booth of Grace McDaniels at the Orlando, Florida odditorium. Photo by the author, July 2015.



Figure 5.2 Wax figure of Grace McDaniels at the Orlando, Florida odditorium. Photo by the author, July 2015.

## CHAPTER 6

### INTERVIEWS, SURVEYS, AND REVIEWS

#### *6.1 Introduction*

I provided my own analysis of the materiality and language of Ripley's exhibits in the previous chapter. I recognize though that a spectrum of interpretation and opinion about Ripley's exists which is the topic of this chapter. I first present the results of my interviews and surveys followed by reviews of the odditoriums that were posted in online posts and on the websites of TripAdvisor, Yelp, and Google.

I conducted interviews with two of Ripley's employees and six interviews with viewers of Ripley's media. All interviewees gave me permission to disclose their names with their answers. Interviews were conducted in person, on the phone, and online through Facebook and Skype; interviewees chose the mode of communication that best suit their comfortability and convenience. Interviews averaged about an hour in duration in which I asked about the types of Ripley's media viewed, experiences with Ripley's, descriptions of the exhibits, comparisons to sideshows and to other museums, and the techniques that Ripley's uses to market the exhibits as odd if they thought that was indeed the purpose of Ripley's. Unless I say otherwise, I chose to transcribe the responses to closely match the grammar and spelling of the respondent.

## *6.2 Interviews of Ripley's Employees*

In my first interview with Mr. Meyer wherein he chose to answer the questions on a Word document, I learned I was focusing too much on the word “odddity” at the expense of other categorizations for Ripley’s exhibits. I became aware of my biases and expanded my future inquiries to be more open-ended in order to allow others to tell me how they prefer to describe and label the exhibits. I had asked Meyer what an oddity was. He responded that it is “something that causes a gut reaction of wonder, a sense of disbelief.” Traits that he listed to describe oddities include “rare, unique, seldom seen/experienced” and “hopefully ‘unbelievable’.” He then said that the wording in my questions and consent form confused him because according to him, not everything in the odditoriums are intended to be an “odddity.” Meyer said: “most aren’t-they are artifacts and or works of art.” In another answer, he refers to the exhibits as “Believe It or Nots!” He said that these artifacts or Believe It or Nots! must be verified as real. I asked if he thought ideas of what an oddity is has changed since the time of Robert Ripley. Meyer responded: “Yes...the world is smaller now, and changing rapidly. New subjects are created regularly. For example there were no space stories during Ripley’s times, or computer stories-both areas of seemingly endless unbelievable facts...our cartoons, books, and museums have to attempt to stay current as to what is perceived as new and unbelievable” (Meyer, interview, May 2015) Overall, there have not been any significant changes since the time of Robert Ripley in what is collected.

Still caught in the trap of the term oddity, I asked Meyer if anyone has ever been offended at labeling the artifacts and people as oddities. He reiterated that again, it is my word rather than theirs, and furthermore, he said: “I hope we ‘label’ them as ‘unbelievable

artifacts,' not as 'oddity' unless it is intended to be so (e.g. Erik Sprague, the Lizard Man). I would be naïve to suggest this never happens, but in 37 years I can think of only two occasions. In both cases we understood the concerns, and changed the displays.” It was in the second interview that he expanded upon these two occasions in which there were a concern of offense, but due to not having explicit permission, I will not discuss them.

Kim Kiff, Ripley’s Florida regional manager, graciously answered the same questions as Meyer to provide me with another employee’s perspective. She chose to answer the questions through a Word document as well. Her role is to oversee all of the operations of Ripley’s attractions in St. Augustine, Orlando, Key West, and Panama City Beach. Before joining Ripley’s staff, she was a school teacher who learned about the company through a field trip to the Ripley’s Myrtle Beach aquarium. She said her desire to always learn new things led her to the job at Ripley’s. In her words, the purpose of Ripley’s is “to provide quality, family entertainment through a wide variety of attractions to our guests and to provide a top notch experience to help build quality family time and vacation memories.”

I was more careful with Kiff about not focusing too much on the label oddity as I did not want to impose the category too much within this interview like I did with Meyer. I asked her which of the following words she has heard or seen used to label Ripley’s exhibits: Believe It or Nots!, oddities, curiosities, curioddities, and artifacts. She said she has seen all of them be used, but she thinks curioddities best sums what Ripley’s exhibits are. She said: “While some things are definitely odd, others certainly peak the individual’s curiosity.” I still asked her specifically about the word oddity in order to compare her ideas of what an oddity is to that of Meyer. Kiff responded that, “according to Webster, it is a

strange or unusual person or thing.” Furthermore, she said that oddities then are people or things that are not considered the norm, and similar words to oddity include curiosity, peculiarity, eccentricity, and idiosyncrasy.

When asked how Ripley’s is able to successfully market their objects as oddities, Kiff said that decoration, arrangement of odditorium space, language, mirrors, and lighting all play a role in appealing to the public’s interest in the unusual. Let it be noted that when I asked this question to both Meyer and Kiff, I wanted to explain what I meant by this question and most likely inadvertently influenced their answers. Instead of just asking how Ripley’s is able to market their exhibits as oddities, in parentheses I said that they could consider the role of decoration, language, arrangement of the exhibits, mirrors, and lighting when responding. In hindsight, it would have been more beneficial to ask this question without prompting them to consider these particular elements in order to see what they would notice on their own. In this question, I also did not ask for elaboration or examples which otherwise could have added a richer understanding.

Kiff answered similarly to Meyer when asked about how Ripley’s compares to other types of museums and to sideshows. Kim responded that both Ripley’s and other museums have educational components, but that Ripley’s should be considered more odditorium. She went on to say that they like to think that their exhibits are more entertaining in that they appeal to all ages with the fun and interactive exhibits. In relation to the sideshow, Kim said: “‘Freak’ is a word that Robert Ripley never used and that is a characteristic that our company carries over today. We appreciate people for their differences rather than ostracizing them. We exhibit, display, and appreciate the diversity that people bring rather than putting them behind a curtain where people come to ridicule

them.” From her answer, it seems that her notion of the sideshow is that they welcome a mockery of the people on display. Again, my goal is to not argue whether that is the case as readers will find an array of opinions about the sideshow in the literature, but her answer reveals the complex views that people have of Ripley’s and similar attractions.

In response to whether she ever experienced any challenges or negative criticism of what is displayed, she said that she really has not. She says that she realizes not everyone will think Ripley’s is appealing, but it is their hope that they can appeal to a broader audience through the diversity of exhibits. Since she is the manager for the St. Augustine odditorium, I asked if she thought the marketed ghost history of the odditorium plays a role in creating an atmosphere of the strange and the unusual. She did not think so. She thinks that just the beautiful architecture and history of the building is what is most prominent. Because the St. Augustine odditorium was the first permanent one, they feel a sense of being the mothership of Ripley’s. Her opinion is that the purported haunting is secondary.

### *6.3 Interviews of Ripley’s Viewers*

In my interviews with five of Ripley’s viewers, I asked them what they think the purpose of Ripley’s is. A majority of the responses seemed to indicate that the viewers recognize the social constructive nature of what becomes regarded as Other. For instance, Matthew replied that he thinks the purpose of Ripley’s is to display the things that our society would deem as odd. Johnny provided a similar answer in which he says that the purpose of Ripley’s is “to show to the world that the word ‘normal’ doesn’t mean ‘normal’ . Society accepts what goes on around them and not what goes on in the rest of the world. The idea of normal is different everywhere you go.” Cody’s response is similar to Matthew and Johnny’s in that he thinks Ripley’s goal is to educate people to not think of the people



displayed as inherently “freaks.” Cody said: “I feel like Ripley’s goal is education. Not everyone knows that these people exist. I mean, they aren’t freaks, but unique individuals. Also, I feel like they are trying to empower those that feel like freaks to accept themselves and prove the people that think they are freaks wrong.”

The other interviewees did not explicitly talk about the social construction of the odd in their responses to this question, but they do in their answers to other questions that I will discuss shortly. In response to this question, David said that Ripley’s intends “to show off different cultures and the uniqueness of those cultures” and Perry simply said that he thinks Ripley’s is mostly for entertainment, but that their goal is to also show to the world the “true and bizarre things.” Finally, Stephen answered: “Well, it would seem the goal is to entertain the reader by showing them uncommon things that they are unlikely to see in their everyday life.”

I received various answers when asked who they believe Ripley’s target audience is. David thought that Ripley’s was meant for people in their early twenties and for people interested in other cultures. He does not think Ripley’s is appropriate for anyone under the age of ten due to some of the “violently graphic stunts like people walking on fire” and due to the torture exhibits. Cody and Johnny’s answers overlap with David’s response as Cody thinks that in general, Ripley’s is for anyone who likes to learn especially about “weird things,” but he thinks it is mostly targeted towards younger people between the ages of ten and twenty. Johnny says that Ripley’s is meant for younger audiences who “don’t look at the things as evil” because “they still have an open-mind.” Stephen thought that Ripley’s is mostly targeted toward first-world people “whose access to the world around them has been expanded through technology.” Both Matthew and Perry responded that they think

Ripley's is intended for anyone who is interested and not necessarily directed toward a certain age group, though Matthew thought that some children might have a difficult time understanding the information.

When asked to openly describe the exhibits of Ripley's, Stephen said that "inconsistent" is a fitting adjective. I asked him to explain why he describes Ripley's in this way, and he said it was because there does not seem to be a unifying theme. His assessment matches with the cabinet of curiosities genre that is characterized by the lack of unity in chronology and typology of artifacts. Conversely, Johnny described the exhibits as well-displayed due to the theming of the exhibits. As an example, he says that the shrunken heads are often displayed in a glass case made to look like a jungle.

David and Matthew both described the exhibits as "strange, weird, bizarre, and freaky." David said that some of the exhibits freaked him out, such as the exhibits of the torture implements. Like David and Matthew, Perry talked about the exhibits as "bizarre and unusual," but he also described Ripley's mode of presentation. He says that Ripley's "goes into details about stuff and lets you see every aspect of it." Cody talked about his simultaneous intrigue and repulsion to the exhibits and that he thinks Ripley's sparked his interest in evolution and biology. Cody said: "I felt repulsed, but also intrigued. I've seen a lot of people that can do weird things from their shows, and almost all of it was slightly repulsive simply because it's not normal to eat a bicycle or glass. And yet, it never disgusted me so much that I wanted to look away."

After allowing my interviewees to describe Ripley's in any way that they can think of, I narrowed my questions to ask them specifically about words that can be used to sum what Ripley's exhibits are. Initially, I was only going to ask about Ripley's marketing of

the exhibits as oddities, but after my interview with Meyer, I decided to expand the inquiry. First, I asked them for the label that they thought best describes what Ripley's exhibits are. For most interviewees, I had to provide examples of what I was asking here. I gave them the following list of labels that I have heard or seen used to market Ripley's exhibits: Believe It or Nots!, oddities, curiosities, curioddities, and artifacts. The interviewee could choose one of those labels or they could provide me with another one that they thought might be more suitable to describe the exhibits.

Stephen and Cody both thought that Ripley's exhibits could not be summed by one word. Cody was thinking about the Ripley's brand collectively, including their aquariums. Cody responded: "I would say that the exhibits defy being tied down by one word. The people I can see as being oddities, the aquarium, like I said, I don't remember anything odd there. And fish are hardly artifacts. Although, seeing as some of the things they have are odd things from the past, I think I might call most of the exhibits oddities..."

Stephen said that "information" was the best word to describe the exhibits because not all exhibits are odd. I asked him to define what he means by "odd." He said: "Odd is the inverse of being common. It is subjective...Now, as for something I would not consider odd, in their website Ripley's displays a saber tooth cat skull. This is an object I have been exposed to many times in my life and is therefore not odd." Here, Stephen recognizes that people and objects are not inherently odd, that it is a subjective and man-made category based on what is common or not in an individual's life. I asked what he thought about the list of words that I provided, and he said that he is not sure that any of them sum the exhibits. He thought the label closest to best describing the exhibits is "curiosities" but even then he said not all of the exhibits were odd enough to arouse much curiosity. To not

totally rule out my question of what an oddity is, I asked Stephen to define both “oddity” and his chosen word of “curiosity” to compare what he viewed the difference to be. Stephen responded:

“A curiosity is an object or situation that would cause a viewer to become interested in that object or situation and want to know more about it...an oddity is something that a person would find uncommon...the two are not mutually inclusive or exclusive. They form a spectrum. Some things are rare and interesting, some things are common and uninteresting, but there are also common yet interesting things and rare yet boring things.”

In sum of his answer, he believes that an oddity is something that is uncommon and that can be either interesting or uninteresting whereas a curiosity is something that captures one’s interest but can be either common or uncommon.

Oddities and Believe It or Nots! were the two labels that stuck out to Perry the most. Consistent with Stephen’s definition, Perry defined oddities as “things you don’t normally see.” Johnny thought that “curioddities” was the best word to sum Ripley’s exhibits as he says it covers the entire spectrum of objects and people that are on display. Johnny says that the exhibits are on a spectrum of being out-of-the-normal and awe-inspiring. Not all of what Ripley’s displays is considered an oddity by Johnny. An oddity to him is naturally occurring, meaning it is not man-made or animal-made. Anyone or anything that is born with a unique condition or skill set is an oddity. In sideshow terms, born freaks rather than self-made freaks would be considered an oddity to Johnny. By his definition, Eric Sprague, the man who tattooed and modified his body to give him a lizard-like appearance, would not be considered an oddity whereas a woman born with a split tongue would be. Johnny says that since not all of what Ripley’s displays are people or objects that naturally came into existence with their condition or skill, oddity alone does not sum Ripley’s exhibits.

Only David discussed what he thought to be stigma associated with the terms oddities and curiosities. David said: “Oddities and curiosities are words you usually hear when you are visiting the carnival to see the bearded lady, for example; artifacts are a more neutral term...oddities and curiosities have stigma connected to them.” David did not go into detail about why he thought there was stigma associated with the words. Furthermore, David said that oddities and curiosities are similar in meaning to “bizarre” and are things that one does not see every day. He does not perceive that everything Ripley’s displays can be labeled as bizarre, and thus, David thinks “artifacts” is the best label to sum the exhibits because it is a broader term that covers more than just things that might be considered odd. Like the other interviewees, he said that what is regarded as odd varies depending on who you talk to. He stated: “Artifacts is still the best word to sum up because there are stuff in there that isn’t weird, just more cultural history...” Additionally, he said the word is not insensitive to anyone as it is a neutral term. Matthew did not provide a definition of oddity and thought that odditorium was the best sum of Ripley’s exhibits without further discussion of what he thinks is meant by odditorium.

Next, I asked my interviewees who they thought had the authority to label someone or something as strange, oddity, curiosity, curioddity, etc. Johnny said: “The only one who can call it an oddity is the one who can witness it...the ones who actually go out in the field and actually discover them should be able to deem them oddities, who actually care about them and not leave them hanging. They preserve a part of our history, a more true history...” The other interviewees replied similarly. They all said that they think labeling someone or something as oddity and odd is subjective and will vary by viewer, and thus anyone has the authority to label someone or something as odd.

I also asked my interviewees about the techniques that they thought Ripley's used to successfully market the exhibits as being out-of-the-ordinary. David, Perry, Stephen, and Cody responded that Ripley's language is used to create the perception that the exhibits are odd. David said that their phrase "Believe It or Not!" is a prime example, and he talks about this phrase as it is used to describe a cobweb painting at one of the odditoriums. In the cobweb painting example, the phrase connotes that the cobweb painting cannot be done by anyone else, that it is an almost impossible task in which viewers would have a hard time believing that someone was able to actually make the cobweb painting. Stephen answered: "Much of what you see is not self-explanatory. Because of this, exhibits are presented with explanatory text. In order to make something an oddity Ripley's focuses in on whatever facet about the exhibit that they find 'odd.'" Furthermore, Cody responded: "I think it's all in the marketing. If you show someone a thing, a carrot for example. I show you a carrot you've not seen and say, 'Gee, this is an odd carrot. Never seen one grow wrapped around another one before.'"

Part of what spurred my interest in the Ripley's research was my question of how they are able to market artifacts and cultures as strange despite displaying similar things that are found in anthropological museums. It was important then that I gain a sense of what the public perceived the difference to be. I received a variety of answers from my interviewees. David said: "Ripley's is far more entertaining because they have a wide range of exhibits....at Ripley's you get a wide range such as art and human." Like David, Perry commented that the anthropological museums that he visited in the past did not display very many artifacts, but he did not make a direct comment about Ripley's in comparison. Cody talked about how Ripley's ensures that their museums are fun and display their

artifacts in interesting ways as opposed to what he thought was the often dull experience of other types of museums. Stephen responded that he thought other types of museums “are primarily concerned with the accuracy of their displays...they operate under the assumption that the subject itself draws the crowd and not the uncommonness of the exhibit.” Johnny’s answer indicated that Ripley’s museums were distinguishable from anthropological and archaeological museums because what and who they display might still exist today as opposed to other museums that often display artifacts from the past that no longer exist. Matthew was the only one who expressed Ripley’s as similar to other museums, but he did not provide explanation as to why he thought this.

I also asked them how they thought Ripley’s compares to sideshows. Only three of the interviewees had a response as the others were not familiar with sideshows. Johnny distinguishes differences between Ripley’s and sideshows. He said:

“Ripley’s is in a class of its own. Freak shows are interesting but they are out more for the money. Ripley’s is more for the knowledge, not out to display horrible, morbid things...more out to display what nature itself has created. By that, they aren’t showing Jeffrey Dahmer’s dental record. Ripley’s shows what the past went through to get where we are today and it also stands for things that are yet undiscovered.”

David thought that Ripley’s was a better alternative to seeing people than what he perceives to be exploitation in sideshows. David said: “Ripley’s is a good alternative because you aren’t essentially keeping the people in a sideshow, people laughing at them, mistreated, poor wages and benefits...” Similarly, Cody offered a critique of sideshows, both of live sideshows and sideshows that are represented in popular media, such as in the show *American Horror Story*. Cody’s perception of *American Horror Story* is that it presents people who are different as the subjects of fear or hate, though he recognizes that

the show is presenting the “freaks” as they might have been perceived in the 1950s, which is the show’s setting. In opposition to that, Cody says: “I feel like Ripley’s looks at the people and sees the things they do and say ‘You’ve got a gift that we want to show the world. Let everyone see your uniqueness.’” Moreover, Cody shared his experience at a freak show in Arizona and compared it to Ripley’s: “I like Ripley’s better because they aren’t just saying, ‘Hey look, this guy can shove a needle through his skin. And over here are some funky looking pickled things.’ Ripley’s actually tries to delve into the science of how people can do these amazing things.”

It is important to note here that these interviews present only a few public perceptions of Ripley’s and sideshows amongst a broad spectrum of various other opinions. Even academic scholarship vary in their analysis and critique of the sideshow genre. In opposition to David’s opinion, for example, some literature talk about the sideshow as having been a profitable career during the Great Depression (Bogdan 1988; 1993).

#### *6.4 Surveys*

I received three responses to my open-ended survey that asked some of the same questions as the interviews. I created this survey for people who were interested in my research but did not have time for an interview. Because I received only a few responses, I am not developing conclusions from this survey. The survey asked thirteen questions regarding what media of Ripley’s they view and frequency of viewing, how they would label and describe Ripley’s exhibits, what media forms they found most memorable, what their reactions to Ripley’s were, how they think Ripley’s is able to present their exhibits as strange, and finally how they think Ripley’s compares to sideshows and similar attractions. The individuals who took the survey remained anonymous.



When asked what they thought the purpose of Ripley's was, one person simply replied "to show off the odd." No insight is provided as to what or who might be considered odd. Another person said: "To show individuals how the things that surround us in society are not always what they seem. Each culture has their own social norms and customs they are familiar with. Also, that all people, cultures, and animals all have something in common." The last person responded that Ripley's purpose is "to make money on people's morbid curiosity."

When asked who they thought Ripley's target audience is, one person replied the "uneducated or young people." Another respondent said that Ripley's intended audience is the "general public that is not well traveled or are interested in the odd." Finally, one person believed that Ripley's was intended for "people of all races, ages, genders, and cultures."

I received different answers regarding what label they thought best summed Ripley's exhibits. The three responses were, "artifacts," "oddities," and "curiosities." I next asked the survey takers to define whichever word they chose as best summing Ripley's exhibits. The person who responded with "oddities" did not provide an answer. In defining artifacts, the person responded: "artifacts are objects found, left, or passed down from different eras by specific people of cultures that had a special meaning, or purpose." A curiosity was defined by one of the survey takers as "something strange or disturbing that could be considered interesting because it is not typically observed in everyday life." Reactions to Ripley's media also varied. One survey participant reported finding Ripley's content exploitative with no additional explanation as to why. Another participant reacted to Ripley's with "mild fascination," and the last person said that Ripley's media is very interesting because he or she enjoys learning about people and things not known before.

Next, the survey takers responded about how they think Ripley's compares to similar attractions. In all responses, there is not definite indication whether the person is describing Ripley's or the media and institutions that they are comparing Ripley's to. Thus, I will refrain from making absolute conclusions about what is said in regards to this question. One person responded that "they add more shock value or try to." The second response states: "they are more knowledgeable and do extensive research about the subjects they speak about." The next person said: "Its goal is to get people to point and laugh and feel disturbed, not to learn about other people, cultures, or scientifically/medically interesting occurrences." Only two of the respondents provided commentary on how Ripley's compares to sideshows. One respondent said that "Ripley's is more educational" whereas the other said that Ripley's is about the same as sideshows.

Finally, they were asked how they thought Ripley's is able to present their exhibits as odd. One person provided a vague response that says "very good up play" while the other responder said that "they present things as rare or one-of-a-kind, exaggerate, and use 'believe it or not' everywhere, implying that it is unbelievable." This last response matches the answers of my interviewees who talked about the importance of language in constructing Otherness at Ripley's.

My other survey was answered by thirty-three people and was created in the earlier stages of my research when I was still focused on the Ripley's exhibits as so-called oddities. In this survey, respondents were asked to rank whether they agree or disagree that the subjects of a series of pictures can be labeled as oddities. They had to rank the pictures on a scale of 1 to 4 with 1 as strongly disagree, 2 as disagree, 3 as agree, and 4 as strongly agree. I created a table that provides a description of the subjects of these pictures and the

rankings of them (table 6.1). All of the pictures in the survey were taken by me at the Ripley's odditoriums that I visited. I decided that I would include the information panel that describes the exhibit within the frame of the picture because I wanted the survey takers to be exposed to the same information that they would if they actually visited the exhibits at the odditorium. Additionally, the information panels are often presented closely to the subject of the exhibit, making it difficult to avoid taking a picture without the panel included. I thus wanted all my pictures to be as uniform as possible in what they revealed about the exhibits. The only image on the survey that did not have an information panel was an image of a half-bodied woman that was displayed on an odditorium wall. I understand that perhaps I would receive different rankings if I repeated the survey without the information panels.

After the survey takers ranked the pictures, they answered three open-ended questions. They were asked how they define oddity, what criteria they used to rank the pictures, and which two photos were most memorable and why. Like in my interviews when asked what an oddity is, several survey takers indicated that they think it is relative to the culture you are a part of. Anything that is not common in your culture can be considered an oddity, and what might be an oddity to one culture might be ordinary to another. However, one person responded that an oddity is anything that is not common anywhere in the world. Other survey takers indicated that what is perceived as an oddity is more personal to each individual; they said that an oddity would be anything that they have never personally witnessed before or on a regular basis. When asked what criteria was used to rank the pictures, one person illustrated the personal perception of the oddity by saying: "things that are odd to me may not be to someone else." Likewise, in another response, the

survey taker said: “I based them on my own thoughts of what is weird and different. I am more tolerant than most people and not many things do I consider weird or odd.”

Overall, when asked to define an oddity, more survey takers simply said that an oddity is something that is not common, without indication if this was culture specific, personal, or worldwide. Conversely, when asked what criteria they used to rank the pictures, the answers seemed to indicate more personal judgement in that the rankings were based on what the individual never before witnessed or what the individual thought to be bizarre and uncommon. I interpreted that most respondents were using personal judgement because in their responses, they would say they ranked the pictures based on their own experiences of what is common or their own definitions of the oddity. They would also include the phrases “to me”, “I thought”, and “I believed” in their responses.

Moreover, I received opposing answers as to what or who specifically could be labeled as an oddity. One respondent said: “Something that is medically deformed, someone who has altered their body beyond the point a ‘sane’ person would...religious relics and tribal culture do not count to me.” Another person says that “genics failure” (I transcribed the spelling exactly), of which I interpret to mean failure in genetics, would not be considered an oddity. Yet, another person simply said a person or thing that is peculiar is an oddity whereas someone else said that a person could not be considered an oddity, but an animal with a deformity could be. Other responses indicated that an oddity is a strange object or practice. Thus, there is no uniform consensus of who or what can be an oddity.

## *6.5 Reviews: Ripley's Genre and Relevance in the Computer Age*

I begin my discussion of odditorium reviews by exploring commentary on the hybridity of Ripley's entertainment and educational styles. Specifically, I examine how Ripley's reviewers define the odditoriums in regards to their organization and institutional type. I next transition to examining their commentary about the relevance of Ripley's in our technology-driven age in which finding information about people, animals, and things around the world can be obtained rather quickly and easily.

While I did not find commentary that suggested the public perceived the odditoriums as giant cabinets of curiosities, they did provide insight about their perception of Ripley's organization and theming. The following are from several reviewers in which their responses are separated by spaces:

"Some of the exhibits were interesting, but there didn't seem to be a theme...a tattooed man, a small car, Egyptian artifacts..." (TripAdvisor 2015, Myrtle Beach Odditorium).

"I also found it to be unorganized and more of a mish-mash of random things. Still, it was probably some of the better valued places in the area and I would recommend it if you happen past it" (Yelp 2012, Gatlinburg Odditorium).

"The exhibits are all organized into several themed walk-throughs where each exhibit is accompanied by a sign providing further explanation" (Google 2015, Orlando Odditorium).

"I was worried that this would be outdated and tired, but it really wasn't. Many interesting artifacts on display and plenty to see in a logical order" (TripAdvisor 2015, Gatlinburg Odditorium).

"...towards the end, the exhibits became more and more primeval, with the different tribesmen and their practices and this can have a scary effect on really young kids "(TripAdvisor 2014, Orlando Odditorium).

The reviewers in the last three comments perceives an organization whereas the first two commentators did not. While the odditoriums in their entirety are not focused on only one theme, they do have theming in individual rooms. It was interesting to read about other visitors' perception of the space because I, for most of my experience, mostly perceived Ripley's as a hodgepodge of random things with little organization. Because I perceived of Ripley's in this way, I came to view the odditorium as a cabinet of curiosities. While the first two reviewers' comments match the cabinet of curiosities genre concerning organization, I found another comment that was not in agreement with the cabinet of curiosities' intended emotional impression. The comment said: "... the amount of exhibits were minimal and uninspired" (Yelp 2014, Myrtle Beach Odditorium). Recall that the purpose of the earliest cabinet of curiosities was to awe-inspire people.

Regarding the second to last comment, it made me think back to my initial question of whether Ripley's had any sort of order to their exhibits. For instance, I wondered if they exhibited objects from people who might be categorized as bands followed by rooms with objects from so-called tribes, chiefdoms, and state societies. While all of these different group types can exist at one time, our earliest ancestors are theorized to have lived in band-like formations on towards today's prominence of state formations. Thus, I think the general public often thinks of these different social formations in terms of chronology: bands are associated with the earliest history, and over time, social formations have become thought of as more complex. I did not find any patterns to indicate this chronological type ordering at Ripley's. Conversely, the one reviewer thought that the exhibits became more primeval further along in the odditorium.

Reviewers also described Ripley's similarities to the circus and freak show genre:

“This place is like an old-fashioned circus side show where you ‘step right up and see the freaks!’ There is an entire room of two-headed animals. Another room has a ‘kissing booth’ where you put your hand on it and a figure turns around to reveal a woman with huge lips who was known as the ‘Mule-faced woman’. Really! Google her story, it is very sad and she was a devout Christian who hated being called a freak...The only part of this museum I liked was the fertility statues that were there two years ago. I touched them and became pregnant six months later! This museum is for adults only, but don’t go unless they update...” (TripAdvisor 2015, Orlando Odditorium).

“This is the world’s greatest museum. Believe it or not? I don’t like the idea of a museum where they use the caveat that what you are about to see might not be true or where factual inaccuracies are acceptable. I guess that’s why I don’t like going to freak shows because you feel duped. This place is a freak show of the inanimate” (Yelp 2011, Hollywood Odditorium).

“I felt kinda bummed at the freak show vibe, even though obvs. The whole Ripley schtick is freak show” (Yelp 2010, St. Augustine Odditorium).

Other than referencing the freak show or sideshow when discussing Ripley’s, one reviewer said that “everything looked like a funhouse at an elementary school carnival” (Yelp 2010, Hollywood Odditorium). A reviewer of the Orlando odditorium also talked about Ripley’s as similar to a funhouse: “It’s like a mix between a museum and a fun house. I think it needs to either lean one way or the other, I was expecting more fun house I guess.” (TripAdvisor 2015, Orlando Odditorium). Another person said that Ripley’s was more like a museum and that there was not much to interact with (TripAdvisor 2015, Orlando Odditorium).

There were reviewers that talked about Ripley’s as a museum with no noticeable hesitation, but it was also common to see reviewers talk about Ripley’s as a “museum,” with an emphasis on the use of quotation marks. When I see words written in quotation

marks, usually I think about how the person is questioning the use of that word. The following are reviews of various odditoriums that comment on Ripley's label as a museum. Again, spaces separate different responses, and I inserted bracketed letters and words in some responses to provide clarity among spelling errors.

“The stuff in the “museum” ranges from curious to bizarre...” (TripAdvisor 2015, Myrtle Beach Odditorium).

“The so called museum was so boring” (Google 2015, St. Augustine Odditorium).

“The place isn't a museum in the normal respect. Sure, there are themed areas, but there's only one path you can take, and most of the areas are pretty narrow...There are a few interactive components, most of which have a scare factor. There's a tunnel where the walls rotate and the walkway stays stationary, giving you a sense of vertigo, as well as a dropping platform, that shifts when your body weight activates it. Oh, and there's a fart machine in the ceiling of the bathroom-hilarity ensued, let me assure you” (Yelp 2006, Myrtle Beach Odditorium).

“If art museums make you drowsy and all the fancy science learnin' of traditional historical museums just ain't for you, then let me assure you that this is THE place you've been looking for your entire life. If you have a passion for the oddball, love crazy curiosities, or simply want something to do on a hot or rainy day, Ripley's fits the bill” (Yelp 2014, Orlando Odditorium).

“I like to think of this place as a science museum for the strange, odd, historical and unusual (well that narrows it down, now doesn't it?)...” (Yelp 2012, Orlando Odditorium).

Several reviewers expressed surprise that Ripley's is still in business with the advent of technology that allows one to have quick access to information on the people and things exhibited in the odditoriums:



“First of all, since Ripley’s Believe it Or Not is rarely advertised as a museum nowadays, don’t expect yourself are about to g[o] into a museum that provides the telescope through time and space for a peek of world cultures and historical oddities. This place is not at all intel[l]ectual, but more for the cheesy surprise of it. There’s a reason why Ripley’s Believe it Or Not isn’t as pupolar [popular] as it was back then, because people are smarter now with the media and technology has provided a much more accurate and objective point-of-view of the world” (Yelp 2011, Hollywood Odditorium).

“We wanted to go in and see the weird stuff inside, so we did. The problem? There wasn’t a lot of it. The skulls and crazy weapons and clothes from Borneo and Polynesian islands are cool-as well as the weird animal cadavers and the like. You know what isn’t cool? The world’s largest rope made of gum wrappers. Who gives a shit?...Thanks a lot. I’ll head somewhere else next time, and just use google or Wikipedia to look up weird stuff” (Yelp 2012, Myrtle Beach Odditorium).

“In a way, it is more of a freak show. A cheap attempt to make people ooh and ahh. These gimmick[s] might work couple decades back, but now, with Wikipedia and channels like Discovery, these contents of exhibitions represents nothing more than entertainment...cheesy entertainment value” (Yelp 2011, Hollywood Odditorium).

“The problem is that you can find all of this stuff (and more) for free on the internet. Tattoo’d ladies? Seen that. 2-headed goat? Seen that. Really long braided rug of gum wrappers? It’s just harder to find something really shocking anymore. And they have a mummy. I just think that should be in a real museum” (TripAdvisor 2015, Gatlinburg Odditorium).

Note that in the last comment, the reviewer also questions the label of Ripley’s as a museum when saying that the exhibits should be found in a “real” museum. Through excerpts from an online news article, we can see more perceptions of Robert Ripley, his odditorium enterprise, and its connection to modern media:

“That contemporary television is largely a freak show seems a matter of little debate, but the original intersection of human oddity and mass media was Robert Ripley’s Hearst-syndicated ‘Believe It or Not!’...while Ripley himself is something of an artifact, director-producer Cathleen O’Connell connects him to YouTube, reality TV and other dubious aspects of current pop culture that may have erupted anyway, but which Robert Ripley midwived into being” (Anderson 2015).

I found one reviewer who had a different reaction to comparing Ripley’s to modern technology and media (I left the grammar and spelling as is):

“Ripley’s is an important museum, if not simply because it is the greatest collection of oddities on the planet, and it was all collected by one man> This was the best way for people to see the strange and unbelievable before the days of youtube and the internet, and still remains the coolest private collection of anything of all time....consider that your grandparents and parents grew up reading everything Mr. Ripley wrote, pouring over the information because it was so unique and marvelous...and here you are saying it’s a boring rip-off because you’ve seen weird things on the internet. For shame” (Google 2015, St. Augustine Odditorium).

Several reviewers challenged the cultural sensitivity of Ripley’s, and their commentary ties into the conversation about the relevance of Ripley’s given the technologies we have available:

“Considerations of what exactly goes in the museum are weird and also somewhat offensive. The stuffed two-headed goat? Oddity. Practices from other cultures that do not match our western sensibilities (ex: lip disks, historical uses for camel bladders)? That’s not on par with the man who drank 61 bottles of ranch dressing in a sitting. Using tusks as currency is potentially unbelievable, I guess (I like to believe adults have a wider breadth of cultural sensitivity/knowledge), which is the umbrella everything falls under, and anthropology and circus sideshows are not exclusive, but stuff like totem poles just doesn’t belong. Crazy first nations people! Then there’s the stuff that’s neither here nor there, like the mannequin mock-up of how

long ago in some country, criminals were placed in coffins with their heads sticking out, left in there to die, then buried in the same coffin-believe it or not!!! Pretty macabre” (Yelp 2008, Hollywood Odditorium).

“...the tickets still seemed overpriced, largely because the exhibits are dated (and often culturally insensitive to our modern PC world) and poorly maintained” (Yelp 2011, Orlando Odditorium).

In response to one reviewer, the manager of the Gatlinburg Ripley’s said: “Because of youtube we are starting to lean more toward interactive exhibits, as it really immerses you in the experience and it’s something you have to do in person” (TripAdvisor 2015, Gatlinburg Odditorium).

In a description of Ripley’s in London, the writer describes the odditorium as “a museum filled with slight embarrassments.” The writer goes on to say: “It’s a bit like a Victorian freak show.” Subsequently, the blogger describes some of the wax figures found there such as three-legged Francesco Lentini, Alypus of Alexandria who is referred to by Ripley’s as “Ancient Egyptian Dwarf,” and a Padaung woman wearing neck rings. The writer says:

“I stare at them. They all have physical deformities. I can’t help feeling a little uneasy...In many ways, the fact that someone sat down and decided to make a bust of Judas entirely from toothpicks is an unadulterated joy, but there are also exhibits that feel as if they aren’t entirely appropriate for modern sensibilities” (Kennedy 2012).

## 6.6 Reviews: Authenticity

Reviewers discussed the issue of authenticity. Some commented that many of the exhibits looked fake or were only replicas of real people and artifacts. Reviewers talked about disappointment in seeing pictures rather than “real items.” Other people commented about either believing or not believing in the validity of the person or object’s existence. Several reviewers questioned the realness of the objects based on whether they were placed behind glass cases or other protective barriers or not. Here are examples of these conversations about authenticity:

“Overpriced to see mainly pictures of oddities rather than real items” (TripAdvisor 2015, Gatlinburg Odditorium).

“...there were very few displays and they all looked plastic and fake” (TripAdvisor 2010, Orlando Odditorium).

“Some exhibits have physical objects but they are out in the open so you know they aren’t real” (Trip Advisor 2015, Myrtle Beach Odditorium).

“I’m not sure which figures are originals or replicas—some are enclosed behind glass cases (Vampire slaying kit) while others are open for touching” (Yelp 2014, Orlando Odditorium).

“...it definitely made me believe enough to go home and do some more research on certain things we found in the place” (Yelp 2014, Myrtle Beach Odditorium).

“Don’t waste your money. Obviously, I did not believe it...Small kids might appreciate it because they don’t necessarily know the difference between good things and bad things” (Yelp 2013, Myrtle Beach Odditorium).

“...Lots of semi believable stuff in there...Its sad, because I really wanted to believe in this place...or not believe as the case may be” (Yelp 2009, Hollywood Odditorium).

“It has some interesting things that really make you stop and wonder if this is real” (TripAdvisor 2015, Gatlinburg Odditorium).

“The museum itself isn’t really that cool-the setup is weird and the explanations for everything are really unbelievable. I really don’t believe most of it” (Yelp 2011, Hollywood Odditorium).

“Weird and wonderful describes Ripley’s to a tee! The place is certainly given the right name, you simply wouldn’t believe it if you didn’t see it for yourself and even then you are doubting yourself and are truly amazed by all the strange sights right before your eyes” (Yelp 2008, Orlando Odditorium).

“We were not impressed. Most of the things there were about freaks of nature and cultures that altered their bodies. It was a[n] assortment of pictures and reproductions not actual objects. I guess we expected more strange scientific facts...” (TripAdvisor 2015, Orlando Odditorium).

“...I love weird and creepy stuff, but this place was way too crowded with annoying screaming kids, and didn’t offer enough ‘real’ exhibits....Filled with replicas-the only authentic stuff would be the paintings, but who really cares about a painting made with gummy bears? Show me a shrunken head instead please” (Yelp 2014, Orlando Odditorium).

“While wandering through this big museum, you have to ask yourself time and time again, is it real? Back before photoshop, and the easy days of faking photographs, I can believe some of these oddities. And the stuff they have on display now are things that would be hard to disprove. It’s very interesting to me that a man would go traipsing around the world in search of such oddities just to display them for other people. But, again, people like to look at odd things-we DO watch reality TV” (TripAdvisor 2015, St. Augustine Odditorium).

A specific exhibit whose authenticity was questioned was the Iron Maiden exhibit. A reviewer stated: “The thing that really made me angry is that they had an iron maiden on display that they said was a ‘medieval torture device.’ This has already proven to be false,

and the fact that they still market it as ‘true fact’ makes me wonder how much of the rest of the museum is total BS. Probably a lot” (Yelp 2014, Orlando Odditorium). Other reviewers did not take the odditorium seriously due to spelling errors in their informational panels. One reviewer of the Orlando odditorium who commented upon the spelling errors said: “What struck me most was the number of spelling errors in the displays. I counted at least six, and most of them were pretty obvious. It really detracts from any kind of museum to have sloppy proofing work like this. Granted, this isn’t a serious museum, but still, do the worse people” (Yelp 2013, Orlando Odditorium).

### *6.7 Reviews: Odditorium Decoration and Sensory Experience*

Given that a significant proportion of my analysis was about the role of humor, shock, and sensorial disorientation in constructing the odditorium space as out-of-the-ordinary, it was important to read about visitor’s experiences with these aspects other than my own. The exterior was a topic of conversation for many reviewers:

“My eye caught the leaning building and I was sold”  
(Yelp 2012, Orlando Odditorium).

“What a dud this ‘odditorium’ turned out to be. The most appealing factor? The exterior which has you believe that the contents will entice, excite, and astonish...I expected oddities: jars with preserved alien creatures, ancient artifacts, etc. What did I find? A few rooms of facts on tablets and the most cheesy mannequin displays demonstrating the stated fact” (Yelp 2010, Hollywood Odditorium).

A comment on the Orlando odditorium exterior adds to my analysis of how the outside decoration of the odditoriums signify to people the supposed unbelievable things that they will witness inside. The comment says: “From the outside the building appears to

be sinking but that's just the start of things to believe or not..." (TripAdvisor 2015, Orlando Odditorium).

One reviewer of the Hollywood odditorium commented more directly on the odditorium's decoration and its role in creating or not creating an atmosphere of the oddity.

The reviewer posted:

"But ever since the recent renovation (within the last year?) it's kind of really boring and not worth taking friends to. The real oddities have been replaced with family friendly 'Hollywoodland' fare, which could be fine except it's all just portraits of a celebrities made of macaronis or something. Way too many of those. I'm also not a fan of the bright lighting and clean walls now. Takes away the atmosphere of it..." (Yelp 2015, Hollywood Odditorium).

This commentator never provided insight into what was meant by "bright lighting and clean walls"; however, the comment stuck out to me because it indicated to me that other visitors besides myself notice the role of lighting and other aspects of the built environment in creating the atmosphere of the odd.

In regards to humor and shock, a reviewer of the Hollywood odditorium said: "I actually felt like this museum had a bit of educational opportunities, along with the gawking and shock value" (Yelp 2013, Hollywood Odditorium). This shock value is commented upon in a review of the St. Augustine odditorium in which the commentator said that her granddaughter jumped into her arms three times when viewing the exhibits (TripAdvisor 2015, St. Augustine Odditorium). Additionally, a few reviewers commented on the flatulence machines in the bathrooms:

"The bathrooms did provide an experience that gave us a story to tell for many years. My BF's grandmother and I were in the bathroom, and let's just say, there's an extra 'surprise' in the bathrooms. Made for quite a few laughs once we figured out what was going on. I'm sure that story

will be told for years to come at family get togethers. Embarrassing” (Yelp 2012, Myrtle Beach Odditorium).

“The farting machine in the bathroom IS pretty funny. I’m not one to typically find gross out humor funny, but when another woman and I were in there alone, both of us couldn’t help but giggle with the obnoxious crudeness of it” (Yelp 2010, Myrtle Beach Odditorium).

One reviewer warned against making faces in the “can you roll your tongue” exhibit because of being watched by other visitors. The reviewer finished the post by saying that he or she felt pathetic after realizing it (Yelp 2008, Hollywood Odditorium). Another person talked about this two-way mirror in a seemingly more positive way. This reviewer posted: “The one thing I liked and made me laugh was the mirror in the entrance, you see people fixing their hair, taking selfies or making faces and little do you know there’s a room behind it where other visitors are laughing and looking at you” (Yelp 2015, Hollywood Odditorium).

An exhibit that was also frequently commented upon besides the two-way mirror was the spinning tunnel that is found in most, if not all, odditoriums. One reviewer said: “...I wasn’t convince[d] that it was going to affect me but after standing in there for a few minutes I was like HOLY SHIT! This is trippy” (Yelp 2015, Times Square Odditorium). Besides the two-way mirror and spinning tunnel, reviewers described their experiences with the falling platform. A reviewer of the Gatlinburg odditorium said that the falling platform scared him or her (TripAdvisor 2015, Gatlinburg Odditorium).

One reviewer’s sensorial experience was described as constantly shifting at the St. Augustine odditorium: “I’ve been there for about 1 hour and I had so much emotions changing in every room I go through. Gross, weird, scary, unbelievable...” (Yelp 2015, St. Augustine Odditorium). Reviewers would recommend and encourage the people reading



their reviews to check out certain exhibits, particularly the “can you roll your tongue” exhibit and the falling platform, though they would not reveal to the reader what would happen if they interacted with those exhibits.

Many reviewers expressed that some of the exhibits were too scary for young children, particularly the torture exhibits or exhibits placed into dark rooms. Other reviewers said that due to the amount of reading, children would not have very much fun nor would they understand the cultural context. Another reviewer seems to think otherwise. This reviewer said that the Myrtle Beach odditorium was not worth the money if the visitor is over twenty. (Yelp 2008, Myrtle Beach Odditorium). In opposition to these aforementioned reviews, one person reviewing the Gatlinburg odditorium said that they think the Ripley’s exhibits could be explained in a way that the kids can understand and appreciate if parents are willing to discuss the exhibits with them in an open-minded way (TripAdvisor 2015, Gatlinburg Odditorium).

I read mixed reviews about the use of interactive exhibits. Some people found the most entertainment in the interactive exhibits whereas others preferred less exhibits. Some people simply described the exhibits as strange, bizarre, oddities without questioning the use of those adjectives to describe the exhibits. Others expressed finding the exhibits gross or outdated.

Finally, reviewers expressed various opinions about the uniqueness of the odditoriums. It was common to find people who said that once you been to one Ripley’s, you have been to them all, but other people expressed amazement at the variety of artifacts Ripley’s had and said that new things could be found at the different odditoriums. Some people claim to visit Ripley’s whenever they have a chance. In response to some of the

reviews of the Orlando odditorium, a guest relations manager said: “All of the Ripley’s museums are about 80% different and 20% the same” (TripAdvisor 2015, Orlando Odditorium).

### *6.8 Conclusion*

It becomes evident from the interviews, surveys, and reviews that while I can find common themes of what is discussed about Ripley’s, there is no consensus on how the public labels the exhibits inside the odditoriums and on how they perceive Ripley’s genre, organization, and theming. It is interesting though that many of the comments exemplified the tensions inherent in Ripley’s dual agenda of being an institution of education and one of entertainment. Some viewers did not question Ripley’s marketing as a museum whereas others did. Other viewers talked about the odditoriums as offering an experience more akin to a funhouse and sideshow. Yet, many visitors, including myself, interpreted Ripley’s as a hybrid of various genres of education and entertainment, which was appealing to some viewers but critiqued by others. In the concluding chapter, I examine another aspect of Ripley’s that would have differing interpretations and opinions: the ethics of representing persons with disabilities and the ethics of displaying human remains.

Table 6.1 Results of Oddity Ranking Survey

Subject of the Image	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
	Number of respondents out of 33			
Genuine Shrunken head	1	1	17	14
West African Nail Fetish Hate God	5	11	12	5
Genuine Vampire Killing Kit	7	12	11	3
The World's Longest Chewing Gum Wrapper Chain	9	10	10	4
Mosasaur Skull	11	11	6	5
Ekoi Human Skin Mask	1	3	7	22
Chinese Fetal Mice Wine	0	3	8	22
Genuine Skull of a One-Eyed Cyclops Goat	1	5	16	11
Mummified Leg, Foot, and Hand	15	12	5	1
Substitute Ancestor Head-New Guinea	9	16	6	2
Long Barreled Target Practice Pistol	21	9	3	0
Tibetan Skull Bowl	4	7	11	10
Cobweb Painting	10	10	9	4
New Guinea Coconut Falsies	8	18	5	2
Alaskan Walrus Teeth Money	9	9	10	5
Tibetan Ram's Skull	5	14	7	7
Inquisition Torture Mask	3	9	8	13
Wax Figure of Maria Jose Cristerna, Vampire Woman	2	6	7	18
Wax Figure of Robert Wadlow, Tallest Man Who Ever Lived	6	5	14	8
Image of Jalisa Thompson, Pops Out Eyes and Rolls Tongue	6	3	13	11
Elephant Bird Egg, The World's Rarest Egg	4	9	14	6
Image of Half-bodied Woman	5	11	12	5
Siamese Piglets	4	2	17	10
Figure of Thomas Wedders, Longest Nose in History	1	4	16	11
Fiji Mermaid, World's Greatest Fake	7	7	10	9

## CHAPTER 7

### ETHICS OF REPRESENTATION AND DISPLAY

#### *7.1 Introduction*

In this chapter, I consider the ethics of displaying and representing persons with disabilities and the ethics of displaying human remains. When referring to disabled persons or persons with disabilities, I understand that these persons are not naturally or inherently “disabled”, but rather, society assigns that label to them. Hence, like the descriptor of “unusual”, how we view and treat people of varying ability and body types is often socially dictated (Thomson 1997). In this context then, I am using the descriptor of disabled as the United States has applied it to certain body types and abilities, but I am not making a claim that these persons are less capable than others.

Extending from my discussion of representation, I briefly revisit how Ripley’s visually and linguistically presents non-Western cultural practices in order for there to be a critical dialogue about the various ways that foreign cultures are continuously Othered by scholars and educational institutions. Even though it is not my aim to form a conclusion about the ethical status of Ripley’s, whether the exhibits they show and how they do so is right or wrong, I hope that readers will become aware of the spectrum of concerns with representation and exhibition and use these cases to think critically in future observations and studies.

## *7.2 Cultural Relativism and Ethics in Anthropological Research*

Rosaldo (2015) wrote an inspiring piece that demonstrated how one might honor cultural relativism without necessarily being an ethical relativist. Cultural relativism is a foundational concept in anthropology which says that we should try to understand what other cultures do and believe within the context of their culture. Throughout the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, anthropologists have interpreted cultural relativism to mean that we cannot make claims that the practices and beliefs of other communities are ethically wrong. However, now anthropologists are shifting away from this absolute cultural relativism, especially given the history of racism, slavery, and occurrences of genocide. Rosaldo insists that we can still adhere to cultural relativism to the extent of attempting to understand why a group of people believes and behaves as they do, but that does not mean we have to agree with those beliefs or behaviors. Rosaldo says: “To understand is not to forgive. Just because you come to terms with how something works in another culture doesn’t mean you have to agree with it; it means you have to engage it” (Rosaldo 2015). Rosaldo’s article made me feel more comfortable about expressing my reactions to Ripley’s exhibits, and it emphasized the importance of having conversations about ethics because it is not against the discipline’s foundation of cultural relativism.

Given the history in which anthropologists have participated in the poor handling of human remains and have caused harm through their representations of others, it is vital that anthropologists strive to engage in discussions of ethics and learn from past wrongs. One infamous case in which the representation and treatment of human remains by an anthropologist has been questioned is that of Ishi, reportedly the last of the Yahi Indians. From his discovery in 1911 until his death in 1916, Ishi worked at the Museum of

Anthropology at the University of California and was studied and looked after by the anthropologist, Alfred Kroeber. It is reported that Kroeber would stage photographs of Ishi by making him wear clothes that he did not wear and engage in old behaviors in order to present him in a pristine way (Starn 2011, 182). Furthermore, after Ishi's death, Kroeber had reportedly ordered for Ishi's body to be cremated as per the request of Ishi. Against Ishi's wishes however, his brain was removed during autopsy, and Kroeber allowed for the brain to be sent to the Smithsonian into the hands of a physical anthropologist for study. It was not until 2000 that Ishi's brain was repatriated to members of the Pit River community (Scheper-Hughes 2001, 17-18).

One of the potential consequences of Kroeber staging Ishi to appear unchanged by Euro-American acts is that it was a missed opportunity to enlighten the public about the genocide of Native American groups in California at the time. What we publish about others can have real-world consequences as we cannot predict how our words and images will be interpreted. The discussion in Chapter Four regarding the language that Ripley's uses to talk about non-Western groups aimed to show the potential interpretations that the public might have for terms such as primitive. While Ripley's may not intend for their usage of primitive to be interpreted in a negative way, it is a possibility given our country's history in which primitive was often synonymous with inferiority. I also talked about how Ripley's sometimes presented the behaviors of communities as if they still engage in them, without explanation of when that behavior stopped. Similar to the case of Ishi then, the public is not educated about the changes that have occurred in the culture since. Thus, it is a representation of who the group used to be, but it is not an adequate representation of who they are now.

### *7.3 The Display and Treatment of Human Remains*

In the case of Ishi's brain, the anthropologists failed to honor his wishes. The treatment of human remains is still a hot issue and is especially important to be aware of in any research that deals with museums. McGowan and LaRoche state: "Many cultures have long viewed human remains as a pinnacle of sacredness, capable of possessing and imparting great power. This point is exemplified by the grandeur with which remains have been displayed and entombed" (McGowan and LaRoche 1996, 110). As stated by McGowan and LaRoche, because of the often sacred nature of human remains and burial, scholars who work with human remains must be mindful of the beliefs that a particular cultural group have of their deceased. Not only do many communities believe that human remains contain great power, but they may believe that a certain ritual of burial must be conducted in order that the buried individual can have a proper afterlife. To disturb the burial can have serious consequences in the eyes of the community of whom the individual belonged.

What can be considered human remains? Scholarship suggests that human remains can include more than just the skeletal or bodily material of a person, but it may also include objects that they are interred with. Additionally, perhaps even images or other representations of a person can be considered an extension of that individual and thought to be sacred and powerful. Balachandran (2009) discusses how scholarship in anthropology, conservation, and museum studies has offered a broader definition of human remains than simply the skeletal or bodily aspects of a person. Some scholars have also defined human remains as being objects that are placed with the body in burial or the broader site in which the body is found (Balachandran 2009, 200). Balachandran states:

“Numerous anthropologists and members of descendant and religious communities have argued that separating remains into “bodies” and “objects” ignores the deep interconnectedness of these different elements in a grave, and violates the sanctity, original intent, and the conceptual integrity of the burial” (Balachandran 2009, 202). Through three examples of her own conservation work, Balachandran contests the mainstream distinction between bodies and objects.

Balachandran discusses the mixed emotions that she felt when conducting conservation work on an Egyptian mummy that ultimately became in the possession of John Hopkins University. She talks about how the mummy seemed to defy categorization; in some moments it seemed more object-like whereas at other times, she remembered the humanness of it. When working on the mummy and in confrontation with the mummy’s body, she felt voyeuristic and often like her conservation acts were violating and cruel. In some instances, she had to take off some of the original wrappings which she felt was only adding to the violence that the mummy experienced over the years of being tampered with. In other moments, she could not fix the damage that was already done and felt that she was not able to prevent the mummy from being memorialized for the violence it experienced after being unburied. This case illustrates the moments wherein the humanness of the mummy became clear to her and how she treated the wrappings of the mummy as a part of its bodily remains (Balachandran 2009, 203-208).

However, when the mummy was concealed at the end of the day, it was as if it transformed back into a museum object. In regards to her work with the mummy, Balachandran says: “This daily ritual seemed to emphasize the way in which human remains in museum contexts defy easy categorization as object or human...”



(Balachandran 2009, 204). Balachandran's revelation here spurs the question: in what moments can we consider something to be human remains, and in what moments can we not?

Similar to how she felt regarding the mummy's wrappings as a part of its body, Balachandran felt unsettled when the skeletal remains of an Egyptian child was separated from the bracelets found with the body. Balachandran says that it is common practice that skeletal remains are separated from artifacts found in the burial and that skeletal remains are usually treated as a priority over other burial remains. In the context of ancient Egyptian beliefs, the author says that all aspects of the burial were deemed necessary for a proper afterlife. Balachandran says similarly, other communities around the world think of objects as extensions of the body, and so it can be a violation to separate the bodily remains from material possessions (Balachandran 2009, 207-212).

The Catholic community strongly adheres to the idea that objects are an extension of the body, namely in the case of saints. When Balachandran was conserving the possessions of Mother Marianne Cope, a nun who worked with leprosy patients from 1888 until her death in 1918 and who later became regarded as a saint, Balachandran could not dispose of any aspect of the objects. She had to preserve even the corrosion and dirt of Mother Marianne Cope's possessions because they were thought to be an extension of herself and contain her spiritual power. Meeting the wishes of the Catholic community, these possessions were put on display at the Shrine and Museum of Blessed Marianne Cope that is located in Syracuse, NY (Balachandran 2009, 212-220). In this case, it was appropriate and expected for the human remains to be displayed as a form of honor and reverence.

Balachandran's case studies teach us that if we are going to ponder the ethics of displaying human remains in museums such as Ripley's Believe It or Not!, we must have a broader discussion of what can be defined as human remains and if such a designation might change depending on context. As an example, even though several of the infamous shrunken heads displayed at Ripley's were indeed once the heads of living people, is there a point that they cease to be considered human remains? Furthermore, we need to consider which exhibits contain possessions that were once a part of a burial and therefore should be treated as human remains according to the beliefs of the community that the items originate.

The case of plastination aids in addressing whether human bodies can cease being considered as remains. In 1977, Dr. Gunter von Hagens invented the process of plastination that "replaces bodily fluids and fat in specimens with fluid plastics that harden after so-called vacuum-forced impregnation" (Institute for Plastination 2016a). Now shown all over the world is Dr. von Hagens' *Body Worlds* exhibit that features whole plastinated human bodies, organs, and bodily slices that can endure for thousands of years with proper care (Walter 2004, 606). According to the *Body Worlds* website, the goal of the exhibition is to educate the public about the effects of poor and good health (Institute for Plastination 2016b). Furthermore, when asked the importance of using actual human bodies to educate instead of models, the staff of *Body Worlds* has responded: "Every human being is unique. Humans reveal their individuality not only through the visible exterior, but also through the interior of their bodies, as each body is distinctly different from any other...It would be impossible to convey this anatomical individuality with models, for a model is nothing more than an interpretation" (Institute for Plastination 2016b).

Controversy surrounds the *Body Worlds* exhibit as visitors ponder how plastinated bodies should be categorized and what the ethics are of displaying such bodies. The most common ethical questions concern the origin of the bodies, whether informed consent was truly obtained from donors, and even with consent, if these bodies should be treated as museum displays. All of these same questions should be examined in the context of Ripley's Believe It or Not!

At *Body Worlds*, the question of what should be considered human remains has no easy or finalized answer. Should plastinated bodies still be thought of as human, or are they different? Walter (2004) explores this question in his ethnographic study of how visitors view plastination as form of existence after death. Walter applies Robert Hertz's theory of wet and dry corpses in his analysis of how a plastinated body should be categorized. According to Hertz and summarized by Walter, corpses that are not treated in anyway are considered "wet" and are subject to mourning, whereas corpses that become treated through such processes like mummification and cremation are considered "dry" and are not subject to mourning (Walter 2004, 604). Could the same be true after the process of plastination, and what is it about the transformation of corpses from being wet to dry that makes them not subject to mourning? Perhaps it is the durability of the dry corpse that dehumanizes the body and makes it more object-like. After all, under proper conditions, mummified and plastinated bodies can far outlast a body that has not been treated.

Walter further examines this question through a discussion of the depersonalization of the bodies. On one hand, a majority of the plastinated bodies are stripped of their skin, hair, eyes, and other features that allow for identification. Their names, places of origin, and cause and time of death are also often kept confidential. Additionally, plastination

strips the bodies of any odor of decomposition. Based on the author's personal reactions and observations of other visitors, confronting these bodies stripped of identifiers and odor allowed for an emotional detachment. Visitors marveled at the beauty and complexity of the bodies, and they could appreciate them for their educational value. But, there generally were no signs of distress or disgust (Walter 2004).

However, when confronting plastinated bodies that still had skin, lips, hair, tattoos, and other features that would have been recognizable as part of someone's identity when alive, the author expressed that he thought of the exhibit as being a corpse (Walter 2004, 616). The humanness of the body was brought to the forefront. Walter says that visitors were most disturbed by plastinates with these identifying surface features, namely the exhibits of babies and fetuses because they often had their skin, lips, and noses (Walter 2004, 616-621). It is those parts of the body that we see in our daily lives and thus come to recognize as signs of personhood. The other bodies, being stripped to muscle, bone, and organs, are not as easily thought of as human because that is not the sight we have of others in our typical interactions.

Visitors also mentioned being disturbed by the poses that many of the bodies are positioned in. Dr. von Hagens states that he puts the bodies in poses to demonstrate what parts of the body look like while in certain actions. The poses that the bodies are placed in do not correlate to what the person did when he or she was alive. For instance, a body placed in a gymnast pose was not necessarily a gymnast in life. Walter thinks that one reason posing is so disturbing is because it re-humanizes the bodies (Walter 2004, 621-622).

Another ethical issue raised regards the origin of the bodies and the process of consent. The staff of *Body Worlds* directly addresses this concern by reassuring the audience that the exhibit has undergone review by “a wide committee of theologians, ethicists, academics, and medical experts” (Institute for Plastination 2016c). The California Science Center posted an ethics review report on the *Body Worlds* website in which they indicate that after thorough consideration, they have determined that adequate consent has been received from all donors of the plastinated bodies that the institute planned to display. The bodies were donated by individuals who were fully aware of what would happen to their bodies during the plastination process and that their bodies would likely be posed in some way. Donors are offered an extensive consent process in which they choose what type of plastinate they want to be (whether fully body, slices, or in parts) and whether they want to be displayed to the public or only in more private settings, such as to medical students (Institute for Plastination 2016d).

Von Hagens and his staff state that only some of displayed organs and fetuses stem from “old anatomical collections”, but unlike their thorough explanation of the consent process behind donated bodies, they were not as thorough about which anatomical collections the organs and fetuses came from and how those bodies were procured. Even still, the California Science Center has not raised this aspect of the exhibition as a concern, at least not of the specimens that they were personally going to exhibit. The institute did recommend that a review committee be formed at any location where a *Body Worlds* exhibit is to be hosted, and that a panel of local experts examine the specific exhibits they plan to show to check for consent. It is also suggested that it is discussed whether the exhibits are appropriate for the particular local audiences (Institute for Plastination 2016d).

But what is the consent process for other museums that display mummies, skeletons, burial possessions, and objects made of body parts? Persons whose remains were unburied by archaeologists most likely never imagined their bodies being put on display somewhere. Do the ethical decisions change based on the age and anonymity of the remains?

Just like Ripley's, the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, England displays shrunken heads, known as tsantsas, that are made by the Achuar, Shuar, and Jivaro groups of South America. Shrunken heads have become one of the most iconic exhibits at Ripley's and Pitt Rivers. Shrinking heads was a common practice among these groups until the 1960s because it was thought that taking the heads of enemies would provide power to the captor's group. In the shrinking process, the eyes and mouth of the head were tied shut to prevent the soul from escaping and wreaking revenge. In the late 1800s to early 1900s, European explorers collected the heads for their own collections and to sell on the tourist market. Often a gun and other goods that the South American groups desired were given in exchange for one of these shrunken heads. It was during this time that counterfeit shrunken heads began to be made. Counterfeit in this context means that the heads were not made for talismanic or ritual warfare purposes. Heads from animals, such as goats and monkeys, and from already dead bodies, were used to make the counterfeit heads (Peers 2010). Ripley's and Pitt Rivers display both counterfeit heads and those that were made for the purpose of collecting enemy souls and power.

Is it disrespectful and otherwise ethically questionable to display such heads? Pitt Rivers has already publicly considered the ethics of these displays. While they still display the heads, the museum has declared that they frequently review whether the display is

respectful to the dead, living descendants, and the visitors. They have already repatriated Maori “tattooed heads”, and they continue to respectfully work with other living communities that might have concern about any of the displays. So far, there has been no mention that groups in South America are asking for these heads to be repatriated (Grasso 2007). I have not found any public declarations of ethics by Ripley’s, though that does not necessarily mean that they have not considered the ethics of displaying the shrunken heads and other similar exhibits.

In 1990, the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) was created to protect the possessions, such as funerary or sacred objects, and human remains of indigenous groups in the United States. All federal institutions that receive federal funds, must comply to NAGPRA guidelines. Federally recognized indigenous groups have the right to ask for the return of human remains and objects if they can show proof of cultural affiliation or lineal descent. In section 4, section 1170 of the NAGPRA laws published by the Department of the Interior, it says that persons who knowingly purchases, sells, or transports Native American remains for profit can be fined and imprisoned (U.S. Department of the Interior 2006).

McGowan and LaRoche express the opinion that there should exist a legislature that protects the human remains of more than just Native American groups. In the case of African Americans, for example, McGowan and LaRoche state that due to the nature of the slave trade, African Americans often cannot trace to specific ethnic or cultural groups in Africa. Unlike NAGPRA which requires that indigenous communities in the United States show proof of affiliation with the remains or objects that they are asking to be repatriated, showing such affiliation may be more difficult for other communities as is the

case for African Americans. Thus, they need a repatriation legislature that has different requirements (McGowan and LaRoche 1996, 114-115).

In hindsight, this research could have been enriched had I asked Ed Meyer specific questions concerning the laws and regulations that he adhered to for the collection of indigenous objects, shrunken heads, and other human remains. I had asked in general if they had any challenges by outside groups regarding their displays, and he had said that there was only one situation in which there was concern, but that has been addressed by Ripley's. Because I did not directly ask for permission to discuss that case here, I will not disclose any details (Meyer, interview, July 2015).

In regards to the shrunken heads, he simply said that all laws have been followed to obtain them, and he did not mention any public backlash against their display (Meyer, interview, July 2015). Since I did not clearly outline ethical questions as a part of my interviewing process, I felt it was inappropriate to push any more questions. I did not want to be perceived as being overly critical or confronting in anyway. Though now, having built those questions more directly into my research could have provided a richer ethical discussion here. I realize now that museums, if they are to exhibit remains that could be controversial, should be prepared to answer these type of questions.



#### *7.4 The Ethics of Representation and of Live Display*

Just as there has been a long history of controversies concerning the treatment of human remains, creating the likeness of someone either through words or images has proven to be an equally powerful tool to offend, to racialize, and to Other. Consequently, much violence, such as prolonged racism, sexism, genocide, and unequal access to resources, has resulted from representations of persons. Weik (2012) discusses the case of the Seminole leader, Osceola, whose head was not only separated from his corpse and allegedly put on display in New York and Florida, but who has been represented in ways that have been considered by some as equally violating. As an example, the Florida State University's mascot logo has been made in the likeness of Osceola's head. While the university claimed that it was their aim to honor the Seminoles, critics have pointed to their imagery as utilizing stereotypical ideas of Native Americans. Another type of representation considered by Weik is that of plaster casts that were made of Osceola's bones wherein the replicas were displayed in museums. Weik questions the ethics of making and displaying these casts without the consent of Osceola (Weik 2012).

A large part of Ripley's collection includes multiple types of visual representation created in the likeness of a person, namely wax models and comic illustrations. Ripley's displays comics that were drawn by Robert Ripley and by cartoon artists proceeding his death. Due to the extensive archive of comics (the comics are produced on a daily basis), I opted to not extensively analyze them. Based on my brief examination of Ripley's comics since 1997, there were no comics that struck me as being ethically questionable. On the other hand, I have already discussed my negative reactions to some of Ripley's wax figures, particularly the one representing Grace McDaniels. Just like Weik questioned the consent

process behind the creation of plaster casts, what are the ethics of producing wax bodies in the likeness of someone? Are the ethics here different from depicting that person in image form? It is clear that many modern-day performers, like Eric Sprague, have chosen to let Ripley's cast wax figures directly using their bodies and thus has consented to the process. But, what of past performers, like McDaniels, who are not alive today to be asked if a wax figure can be made of them and displayed at Ripley's? Do we have rights to represent others how we desire after they are deceased, or should this be contentious just as it is to display bodily and skeletal remains? I am left with more questions than I have answers for in this thesis, but it illustrates areas of research that are still needed.

The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 was enacted to protect persons with disabilities by ensuring that they are given equal access to opportunities and resources (ADA National Network 2016). Fordham (2009) raises the concern that even if there is an appearance of consent by disabled persons to display their bodies, "their consent might not justify the stigmatizing effects of their compromise on others who also have unusual bodies and seek to be respected in more mainstream institutions" (Fordham 2009, 221). By some performers complying to have their bodies described as "strange" or disturbing in some way, Fordham says that it might inadvertently result in the discrimination of other persons with bodies that are perceived as disabled or deviant. Thus, having consent does not necessarily make the display of disabled bodies less exploitative.

While Ripley's does allow for live sideshow performances, I have only observed performances by so-called "self-made freaks", those persons who have purposely altered their bodies, and persons performing novelty acts such as sword swallowing and resting on a bed of nails. I have not seen live performances at Ripley's for the sake of solely

showcasing a disability. Yet, Ripley's exhibits wax models of past sideshow performers who were shown only because of a disability. Therefore, we must be aware of how the representations of them might have repercussions for other persons with similar conditions. The figure of McDaniels was the only wax model that I felt uneasy about because of the potential for encouraging discrimination, even if unintentionally. I wondered what someone with a similar condition as McDaniels would feel like seeing her exhibit. It seems that several other visitors felt similarly based on their reviews of Ripley's. In general though, I thought that Ripley's was trying to direct the viewer's attention to the achievements and positive aspects of the persons represented by the wax figures.

Recall that in Chapter Two, I discuss the various speculations about the decline of the freak show. One of the proposed reasons was that the mystery behind the development of deviant bodies began to be unraveled, and these bodies were seen as better fit for medical institutions and asylums. With the blossoming of the eugenics movement that sought to form a nation of persons with so-called perfect and pure bodies, deviant bodies were institutionalized and laws were created to ban the shows that exposed these bodies to the public (Fordham 2009). Recall as well that several of the modern-day freak shows, like the Venice Beach Freak Show, are bringing these bodies out from the dark with the agenda of normalizing them as a part of our world's beautiful diversity that ought to be appreciated. They are thus using their shows as an entertaining way to espouse social commentary that challenges our notions of normality.

## *7.5 Conclusion*

Despite raising these ethical questions and having expressed several of my negative reactions toward Ripley's exhibits, I overall enjoyed my experiences in the odditoriums. I thought that the odditoriums were for the most part family friendly and an exemplar of appreciating cultural and biological diversity. I greatly valued the warm welcomes of the employees and especially the openness of Mr. Meyer, whose knowledge and assistance immensely enriched my research.

## CHAPTER 8

### CONCLUSION

#### *8.1 Summary*

Ripley's Believe It or Not! is founded on entertaining the public with their display of the allegedly odd, unbelievable, and shocking. In Chapter One, I argued that the marketing of someone or something as odd is a manifestation of Othering, which is the process of delineating "us" versus "them." The category of "us" is defined through emphasizing the extreme differences of persons and things in the "them" group. I have analyzed Ripley's through a post-structural lens; that is, I recognize the social constructiveness of categorization. People and things are not inherently Other, but rather, they are constructed in that way through the rhetoric and treatment by persons usually in a position of power. .

I have argued that because notions of what is odd and Other is culturally specific and changes over time, Ripley's uses decorative techniques along with language to guide visitors to think of the exhibits inside as strange. Every facet of the odditorium experience plays a role in the construction of the odd, from the exterior of the buildings to the manipulation of the senses. While I mostly focused on the material side of framing Otherness, I have also sought to consider the immaterial aspects as espoused by Miller (2010). My analysis of immateriality encompassed perceptions of the odditorium space,

including notions of ghost residents and the age of the building. Ripley's spectacle of the odd is not a new genre of entertainment, but rather, it falls within the history of displaying live persons in sideshows, world expositions, and ethnographic exhibitions for the purpose of showcasing bodily and cultural differences. This thesis has examined techniques that Ripley's uses to emphasize difference that is similar to what has been used in these other past amusement attractions. Cabinets of curiosities is another genre of display that I have argued Ripley's is reminiscent of. Before the organization and formalization of the modern-day museum, cabinets of curiosities often were an eclectic mix of things in which little was known about at the time. It was common to find a similar mishmash of exhibits at Ripley's, sometimes with nothing more than a label of what the object was. I argued that it was this lack of contextualization that made it easier for viewers to impose their own ideas onto the objects; however, it is yet to be studied whether a lack of contextualization usually results in visitors challenging ideas of oddness or enforcing it.

Unlike structuralists who seek to examine rigidly demarcated structures underlying thoughts, language, and behavior, a post-structural stance regards the boundaries of categories as fluid and messy. In the case of Ripley's, Othering is more carnivalesque in nature, as discussed by Bakhtin (1984). Ripley's does not always provide a clearly defined boundary between "us" as the visitors and "them" as the person or thing on display. As I illustrated in Chapter Four, the odditorium visitors are at times turned into the spectacle wherein their own bodies and cultures are on display or under study. Through this reverse gaze and reflexivity, visitors are able to see that they too can be perceived as the strange one. Thus, Ripley's plays on the tension of reinforcing cultural and bodily norms in some moments of the odditorium journey while in other moments, they may be interpreted as

challenging norms. The carnivalesque goes hand-in-hand with the grotesque. Both are characterized by ambiguity. The ambiguity of Ripley's is evident not only in their distortion of the "us" and "them" categories but also in their muddling of the real and unreal as discussed Chapter Four.

It has been stressed several times throughout the thesis that my interpretation of Ripley's stems from my particular educational training, theoretical leanings, and personal experiences. Where I have interpreted Ripley's as communicating Otherness, other scholars and visitors might interpret a different meaning. Historically, persons desiring power have justified their domination through Othering certain groups based on factors like ethnicity, race, religion, sexuality, and gender. Even so, constructing and communicating Otherness does not necessarily have to be a negative message. As the Venice Beach Freak Show and other modern-day freak shows illustrate, displaying difference can be a powerful tool for challenging, rather than giving in to our notions of bodily and cultural norms. A bearded lady, for example, might proudly show the world her facial hair rather than shave it as a means to sway mainstream ideas of beauty and femininity.

## *8.2 Goals and Future Directions*

One of the main goals of this thesis was to simply have readers think more critically about aspects of their popular culture that have become such a normative part of their lives that they often do not question them. Ripley's has been a part of U.S. culture for almost a century now, and yet, few studies have been conducted about the institution. It is less likely that the general public regularly questions institutions that are thought to be more authoritative and objective, as is often the case with educational and scientific institutions

like museums. However, the public is not comprised of passive dupes either. My discussion in Chapters Five and Six of the public's critique toward certain exhibits at Ripley's, like that of Grace McDaniels, stands as an example of their critical insights.

Finally, I aim for this research to be a first step to addressing in future studies how the presentation of certain people and objects as strange, oddities, and Believe It or Nots! (and other adjectives used by Ripley's) influences the public's perceptions of cultural and bodily difference and subsequently, how these perceptions impact people's interactions with others. Additionally, as Chapter Seven has exemplified, there are plenty of ethical questions and concerns regarding representation and the display of human remains that are worthy to be examined in more depth. The issue of representation is becoming more complex with our burgeoning forms of digitized media, and questions of collecting and displaying human remains is complicated by innovations in preservation, as in the case of plastinated bodies.



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## APPENDIX A—INTERVIEW INFORMED CONSENT LETTER

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

My name is Sarah Haughenbury. I am a graduate student in the Department of Anthropology at the University of South Carolina. I am conducting a research study as part of the requirements of my master's degree in anthropology, and I would like to invite you to participate. This study is funded by the Department of Anthropology at the University of South Carolina.

I am studying how people and objects are presented in the social media, odditoriums, television shows, podcasts, books, cartoons, and advertisements of Ripley's Believe It or Not! The purpose of this study is to learn how viewers experience Ripley's presentations of people and objects, and specifically, to learn what techniques Ripley's uses to create the perception that the people and objects of their media and odditoriums are oddities. You are being asked to participate in this study because you either have visited Ripley's odditoriums, viewed their media, or are an employee for the company.

If you are a worker of Ripley's, your participation in this project will involve you being interviewed by me about what people and objects are chosen by the company, how they are acquired and displayed, how Ripley's compares to similar amusement attractions, and your experiences working for the company. If you are a viewer of Ripley's, you will first be asked about your general experiences with Ripley's and how you describe and label their exhibits. You will then be asked to make a list of who or what you consider to be oddities. Next, I will ask you to rank pictures based on the degree to which you think they resemble oddities. These three activities are estimated to take no more than 30 minutes. You will then be interviewed by me about your list of oddities, picture ranking, and any concluding remarks you might have about Ripley's media or visits to their odditoriums. For both workers and viewers of Ripley's, I estimate that the entire interview will take no more than an hour of your time. Interviews will take place in a private location of your choosing either in-person, on the phone, or online.

If you give permission, the session will be video or audio taped to allow me to correctly remember what you said. The video and audio tapes will not be shown publicly and will be destroyed after transcription and analysis. You may choose either your full name, first name, or a pseudonym (fake name) to be linked to your interview. No other personal identifiers will be recorded. My notes and all audio and video tapes will be kept in a lock

box in a secured office. While I will do my best to safeguard interview materials, I cannot guarantee that this information will be safe from theft by persons outside this project.

Your participation in this study is fully voluntary. You may choose to not participate or you may discontinue participation at any time without negative consequences. You may choose to not answer any question. If desired, a copy of interview transcripts will be provided for you to review before I use it in my master's thesis paper. You may withdraw the use of your interview at any time before my thesis is submitted for review on January 11, 2016. If your interview is used, you will receive credit linked to your chosen name.

I foresee no risks of this research, but you may experience some discomfort if you choose to be video or audio recorded. This research or your participation will not directly benefit you, but the information will be used to understand how people and objects become categorized as oddities by popular companies and museums. My project is a first step to addressing in future research how the presentation of certain people and objects as oddities impacts perceptions of cultural and bodily difference.

If you would like to participate in this study or if you have any questions, please contact me at (removed number) or at [sjh@email.sc.edu](mailto:sjh@email.sc.edu). Regarding questions, you may also contact my faculty advisor, Dr. Terrance Weik at (removed number) or [weik@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:weik@mailbox.sc.edu). If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Office of Research Compliance at the University of South Carolina at 803-777-7095.

Thank you for your consideration,

Sarah Haughenbury

## APPENDIX B—SURVEY INFORMED CONSENT LETTER

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

My name is Sarah Haughenbury. I am a graduate student in the Department of Anthropology at the University of South Carolina. I am conducting a research study as part of the requirements of my master's degree in anthropology, and I would like to invite you to participate. This study is funded by the Department of Anthropology at the University of South Carolina.

I am studying how people and objects are presented in the social media, odditoriums, television shows, podcasts, books, cartoons, and advertisements of Ripley's Believe It or Not! The purpose of this study is to learn how viewers experience Ripley's presentations of people and objects, and specifically, to learn what techniques Ripley's uses to create the perception that the people and objects of their media and odditoriums are oddities. You are being asked to participate in this study because you either have visited Ripley's odditoriums or have viewed their media.

Your participation will involve you taking one or two surveys that is estimated to take no longer than 20 minutes each but might vary depending on the length of your answers. You may choose to take only one or both surveys. Surveys can be completed in print or electronic form. In one survey, you will be asked 13 questions about the Ripley's media you view or have viewed, your experiences with Ripley's and reactions to their media, how you describe and label their exhibits, and how you think Ripley's compares to similar amusement attractions. The other survey will show you 25 pictures and ask you whether you agree or disagree that the pictures are depicting oddities.

You will remain anonymous and no personal identifiers will be recorded. My notes on the surveys or any printed surveys will be kept in a lock box in a secured office, and the results of all online surveys will be directly emailed to me. While I will do my best to safeguard survey materials, I cannot guarantee that this information will be safe from theft by persons outside this project.

Your participation in this study is fully voluntary. You may choose to not participate or you may discontinue participation at any time without negative consequences. You may choose to leave any question unanswered.

I foresee no risks of this research, and this research or your participation will not directly benefit you. The information will be used to understand how people and objects become categorized as oddities by popular companies and museums. My project is a first step to



addressing in future research how the presentation of certain people and objects as oddities impacts perceptions of cultural and bodily difference.

If you would like to participate in this survey or if you have any questions, please contact me at (removed number) or at [sjh@email.sc.edu](mailto:sjh@email.sc.edu). Regarding questions, you may also contact my faculty advisor, Dr. Terrance Weik at (removed number) or [weik@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:weik@mailbox.sc.edu). If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Office of Research Compliance at the University of South Carolina at 803-777-7095.

Thank you for your consideration,

Sarah Haughenbury  
Dept. of Anthropology  
University of South Carolina, Columbia

## APPENDIX C—INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR RIPLEY’S EMPLOYEES

- 1) What is your position within the company/or odditorium?
- 2) Can you briefly tell me about your job expectations and roles?
- 3) What attracted you to work at Ripley’s?
- 4) Are there any aspects of your life (ex: education, past job experiences, interests) that led you to this work?
- 5) What prepared you for a job here?
- 6) What other job positions does Ripley’s offer?
- 7) Does Ripley’s have curators in the odditoriums?
- 8) Who writes the information panels for the artifacts? Is provenance information for the artifact documented?
- 9) Who is in charge of designing the exhibition space?
- 10) What qualifications are required for job positions in handling the artifacts, designing the exhibition space or media, and managing an odditorium?
- 11) What is the relationship between a Ripley’s franchise and the corporate office?
- 12) What level of autonomy does franchises have? What are their processes of obtaining and exhibiting oddities?
- 13) How does Ripley’s handle relationships with the public: responding to reviews of the company and interacting/connecting to the public?
- 14) What is an oddity?
- 15) What traits do oddities have?
- 16) What are similar words to the oddity?
- 17) What do you think are connotations of the oddity?
- 18) What connotations do you think others have of the oddity?
- 19) What criteria is used when searching for oddities, and how are they searched for?
- 20) What sources or places do oddities come from?
- 21) Do you think ideas of what an oddity is has changed since Robert Ripley was alive? If so, how?
- 22) Are there differences in the types of artifacts being collected now as opposed to when Robert Ripley was alive, and is so, what are they?
- 23) How might the decoration and arrangement of the odditorium space play a role in creating an atmosphere of the oddity? What is the role of lighting, mirrors, and the different types of exhibits?
- 24) What are laws and policies involved in obtaining oddities? Are there any challenges?
- 25) How do you obtain oddities that might be viewed as sacred in other cultures, and how do you obtain human remains (shrunken heads, ritual objects made from human skeletal material).

- 26) Have there been challenges from other cultures regarding Ripley's collections?
- 27) What reactions does Ripley's hope that viewers will have regarding their collections?
- 28) Do you think anyone takes offense for labeling these objects and people as an oddity?
- 29) Who is involved in choosing the oddities, and who has ultimate decision over what Ripley's exhibits?
- 30) Do the collections at each odditorium stay the same, or do they ever change?
- 31) What happens to oddities in storage? Who takes care of them? Are they ever sold?
- 32) Who decides what artifacts each odditorium will receive?
- 33) What are differences and similarities between the odditoriums?
- 34) What do you think attracts people to Ripley's, and what kind of people do you think is attracted to the company?
- 35) How do you think Ripley's compares to other types of museums, such as ethnological museums (ex. Smithsonian, Field Museum)?
- 36) Are there any common exhibits that all Ripley's odditoriums have?
- 37) What would you say are Ripley's icons, and why do you think it became an icon?
- 38) What are your favorite artifacts presented at Ripley's?
- 39) What do you think is the goal of Ripley's in showing these oddities?
- 40) Is Ripley's more entertainment, educational, both, or other?
- 41) What does Ripley's hope is the outcome of the viewer's experience?
- 42) What does Ripley's mean when artifacts are labeled as "authentic" or "genuine"?
- 43) How is the phrase "believe it or not" used to talk about the artifacts? What is the meaning of this phrase?
- 44) Ripley's has connections to world fairs and sideshows; do you think Ripley's is trying to maintain these connections or create a similar atmosphere as the historical sideshow?
- 45) If familiar with the sideshow, how does Ripley's compare?

## APPENDIX D—INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR RIPLEY’S AUDIENCE

- 1) What Ripley’s attractions have you visited, or what forms of their media do you view?
- 2) Have you experienced: Ripley’s books, TV shows, radio shows, odditoriums, Facebook/Twitter/Instagram page, Ripley’s website, cartoons?
- 3) How frequently have you visited those attractions or viewed those forms of media?
- 4) Do you still visit Ripley’s museums or view their media? If not, why did you stop?
- 5) What do you think the purpose or goal of Ripley’s is?
- 6) Who do you think is Ripley’s target audience?
- 7) What attracted you to view Ripley’s media or visit the odditorium?
- 8) How would you describe the exhibits at Ripley’s?
- 9) Are there any words that could be used to sum up what Ripley’s exhibits are?
- 10) Is this your own word to describe Ripley’s, a word others have used, or the words Ripley’s uses to label their exhibits?
- 11) What are similar words to \_\_\_\_\_ (whatever word they chose to sum up the exhibits)?
- 12) Which of these following words have you heard or seen used to label Ripley’s exhibits?: Believe It or Nots!? Oddities? Curiosities? Curioddities? Artifacts? Any others \_\_\_\_\_?
- 13) Are the above words similar to the word(s) you have chosen to label Ripley’s exhibits?
- 14) Which word do you think best sums up Ripley’s exhibits?
- 15) Can you freelist examples of \_\_\_\_ (whatever word they chose)? Can you freelist examples of oddities?
- 16) I will next show you a series of pictures. If each of the pictures were being labeled as oddities, tell me on a scale 1-4 if you disagree or agree with it being labeled as such. (1-strongly disagree 2 disagree 3 agree 4 strongly agree).
- 17) What criteria did you use to rank the pictures? What made certain pictures ranked higher as oddities over others?
- 18) Who decides what an oddity is?
- 19) How do you think others view the oddity?
- 20) Pick two pictures that really stands out to you. What about them stand out to you?

- 21) What was your most memorable experience with Ripley's and why? Which Ripley's attraction/media form has been most memorable and why?
- 22) What exhibit was most memorable?
- 23) What was your least favorite part about Ripley's?
- 24) Any other comments about your experiences with Ripley's?
- 25) How do you think Ripley's creates the perception that their exhibits are oddities? Was it how they decorate the odditorium? Was it how they talk about the objects or people? Are these people and objects naturally oddities?
- 26) What were your reactions to their media/odditoriums?
- 27) How did you feel about the way they represent people and objects?
- 28) How do you think Ripley's compares to other forms of entertainment that display objects from around the world, such as anthropology museums?
- 29) How do they compare to sideshows or freakshows, if you are familiar with these type of shows?
- 30) How do you think the people presented at Ripley's is similar to or different from other current popular representations of these people?
- 31) What do you think of their phrase: "Believe It or Not?"

## APPENDIX E–SURVEY QUESTIONS

- 1) Which of the following Ripley's media have you experienced? (Check all boxes that apply)
  - a. TV show
  - b. Radio show/podcast
  - c. Odditoriums (Ripley's museums)
  - d. Facebook/Twitter/Instagram/Pinterest
  - e. Ripley's website (www.ripleys.com)
  - f. Comics
  - g. Books
  - h. Games
  - i. Other \_\_\_\_\_
- 2) How frequently have you viewed the above media forms? If you no longer view them, why did you stop?
- 3) What do you think is the purpose or goal of Ripley's?
- 4) Who do you think is Ripley's target audience?
- 5) Which of the following words have you heard or seen used to label Ripley's exhibits? (Check all boxes that apply)
  - a. Curiosities
  - b. Curioddities
  - c. Believe It or Nots!/BIONS
  - d. Oddities
  - e. Artifacts
  - f. Other \_\_\_\_\_
- 6) Which of the words in the previous question do you think best summarizes what Ripley's exhibits are?
- 7) In your own words, briefly define or describe whichever word you chose in the previous question
- 8) Which Ripley's attraction, media form, or exhibit has been most memorable to you?
- 9) What were/are your reactions to Ripley's media?
- 10) How do you think Ripley's compares to other media or institutions that display objects or people from around the world? (example: history/archaeology/anthropology museums)
- 11) If you are familiar with sideshows/freakshows, how does Ripley's compare?

- 12) How do you think Ripley's is able to present their exhibits as being strange and unbelievable? (You could consider the way Ripley's talks about the exhibits or how they decorate the exhibits)
- 13) Any other comments regarding Ripley's?