On Body Snatching: How Rhetoric of Globalization Elides Cultural Difference in Bodies … The Exhibition

In an essay on the confluence of globalization and interdisciplinary research, Shome (2006) references how Spivak (1993) draws “attention to intersection of knowledge, pedagogy, violence, gender, nation, imperialism, the global, and the unseen centrality of the subaltern informing, underwriting, overwriting, and constituting this intersection” (Shome, 2006, p. 18) with use of Mahasweta Devi’s short story “Douluti: The Bountiful.” In Devi’s story, a schoolmaster named Mohan in a village in India finds the dead body of Douluti, a female prostitute and figure of exploitation, on top of a large clay map of India on which Mohan had planned to teach that day, meaning that Mohan must alter the story of India he had planned to tell in order to account for Douluti’s body. Drawing from Spivak’s use of this story, Shome (2006) suggests that “we are all Mohans—knowledge providers and producers—and we need to rethink our maps for Douluti is all over the globe” (p. 19). Shome (2006) then offers goals and practices on “the intellectual responsibilities and ethics guiding interdisciplinary work in communication studies in the current global moment” (p. 19).

Like Devi’s story, Bodies…The Exhibition (hereafter referenced as BTE) offers instances of public display of deceased human bodies, as it displays bodies and body parts that have been plasticized using what the exhibit calls a “polymer preservation process” in which silicone rubber replaces tissue water. BTE utilizes the mantra “to see is to know” throughout its exhibit, and as visitors traverse the exhibit, they witness displays that utilize that mantra’s logic. The exhibit suggests that as visitors see bodies and body parts, they will know more about how their own bodies’ work, thus situating BTE’s content within knowledge claims about human health and human existence. Meanwhile, these bodies are situated within contemporary global relations. BTE utilizes bodies of Chinese origin (Premier Exhibitions, 2011), while presenting its knowledge claims as universalized truths, thus framing its exhibition within discourses of global knowledge production, though BTE is a largely Western
phenomenon produced by Atlanta-based Premier Exhibitions. As such, BTE draws specifically on rhetoric of globalization, which, as Marcuse’s (2007) critique of art as a site for a degraded state of cultural understanding within globalization demonstrates, includes corporate and socio-political discourses, texts and symbols used to facilitate transnational movement of labor, goods and services while compartmentalizing culture in the process.

At the same time, for as much as BTE emphasizes what viewers see by looking at the plasticized bodies, the exhibit keeps unseen some aspects of those bodies, their origins, and the individuals whom they represent. Though BTE has acknowledged China as the source of its displayed bodies (Premier Exhibitions, 2011), the exhibit does not explicitly mention these origins, nor does it acknowledge the individual identities or backgrounds of the people whose bodies it uses. In Devi’s story, Douluti’s dead body becomes the rupture through which the exploited subaltern affects the dominant narrative that Mohan would otherwise tell. Yet, BTE folds dead bodies of exploited undocumented Chinese individuals into the narrative that Premier Exhibitions offers.

As XXXXXX have shown, BTE uses the rhetoric of science situated within calls for accountability for personal health that rely upon universalized characterizations of human biology while eliding intercultural differences between Western contexts for display and Chinese origins of individuals whose bodies BTE displays. Elaborating upon that analysis, this essay connects that process of elision more specifically to uses of rhetoric of globalization and identifies ramifications for globalization that such uses justify and reinforce. We first situate our analysis within work on rhetorical constructions of globalization. We then explain the significance of museums and exhibitions as sites for the deployment of the rhetoric of globalization, particularly given the notable history of presentation of human bodies within Western exhibition culture. Contextualizing BTE within the specific genre of plasticized bodies exhibitions, we then conduct a rhetorical analysis of the exhibit based on field notes from a coauthor’s visits to BTE in three U.S. locations. In this rhetorical analysis, we show specifically how BTE’s reliance on a “common difference” trope perpetuates understandings of globalization that mask
intercultural inequalities of the contemporary global sphere. Ultimately, we argue that elision of intercultural awareness within BTE works through the contextualization of a rhetoric of globalization based in consubstantiation that naturalizes Western cultural practices and knowledge claims as the basis for intercultural exchange.

**The Rhetoric of Globalization**

Globalization discourses are rhetorical, entailing specific modes of intercultural communication (Asante, 2006; McKerrow, 2000). Hartnett and Stengrim (2006) note that rhetorically “‘free trade’ has been remarkably persuasive for justifying globalization” while behind the scenes “elites have sought to decouple … violence … war, economic domination, and cultural conquest from any sense of political, economic, or historical causality” (p. 8). Eubanks (2005) argues that the rhetoric of globalization uses highly persuasive conceptual metaphors “rooted in bodily and cultural experience” (p. 174). Such experiences call upon cultural movements across geographical regions, in line with the scapes theorized by Appadurai (2000) as the basic dimensions of cultural flow within globalization. Those global flows themselves tend to be characterized within supposedly inclusive rhetoric of globalization, though, as Shome and Hegde (2002) suggest, “the very term globalization presents itself as a universal, all-inclusive concept that captures the reality of our times. However … an alterity … disrupts the singularity of the euphoric global rhetoric. Demanding critical attention from communication scholarship are the disconnected spaces of globalization, the unaccounted configurations of power, the global erasure and silences” (p. 181).

We seek to offer such a disruption as we examine the rhetoric of globalization, which we define as discourses and symbolic practices that influence people’s lives worldwide (Markovits, 2009), particularly as they portray economic or political upheaval as “inevitable” (Hay and Rosamond, 2002). Globalization features public policy discourse that works as a “convenient justification for policies pursued for altogether different reasons” (Hay and Rosamond, 2002, p. 150). Evincing “responsibility-
displacement,” transnational power brokers use rhetoric of globalization to justify “unpalatable” actions (Hay and Rosamond, 2002), thus shirking “concerns for social justice” while normalizing goals of “private profit and financial success” (Sandler, 2007, p. 473). Furthermore, globalization as a trope “disguises social exclusion behind … neutral language…in public” (Sandler, 2007, p. 473). The globalized nature of the public sphere enables dilution of international democratic principles and ideals as “part of the banality of the everyday” (Best, 2005, p. 221).

Given the predominant frame of globalization as an unstoppable, ahistorical process (Flusty, 2004), its resulting suasory discourses often enable perspectives offering wholesome unities among diverse peoples, nations, races, ethnicities, languages, and other identifying markers of difference (Wilk, 1995), yet this frame of globalization typically overlooks the politics of cultural markings or economic disparity to achieve the illusion of unity in diversity (Doerr, 2008; Riordan, 2004). In BTE’s context, the rhetoric of globalization achieves a forgetting of ethical responsibilities, especially where meaningful intercultural exchange is possible but is neither sought nor achieved (Brawley, 2003; Doerr, 2008; Hebron and Stack, 2009; Holton, 2005; Markovits and Tomlinson, 1997). Pinpointing the scope of inquiry into one site for the deployment of the rhetoric of globalization, we focus on what Wilk (1995) terms global “structures of common difference,” wherein economics in global culture promote Westernized cultural aspects while effacing non-Western ones. More specifically, we focus on the “common” side of these structures, as BTE effaces cultural differences through rhetorical constructions of human commonality across the globe. First, though, we must recognize the significance of the museum and museum-style settings in which BTE appears as sites of deployment for the rhetoric of globalization.

Rhetoric of Globalization and Bodies of Others in Museum Exhibits

Thomas (2008) emphasizes that museums secure a central place in contemporary Western life by employing terms such as “globalization, cultural diversity and … aesthetic experience” (p. 146). These
practices can serve multiple purposes, ranging from opening up opportunities for intercultural understandings to obfuscating such historical, cultural and social understandings. Such exhibits render enjoyable globalization’s inherently dislocating “movement of individuals, peoples and cultures” (Lohman, 2006, p. 18). Unpleasant details of globalization often disappear, especially through “bodies of people of color [who are both] invisible within and … central to the processes of global capitalism” (Davis, 2006, p. 37). Globalization as a rhetorical force often contributes to the normalization of practices of domination (Schiller, 2008).

Museum displays often trivialize histories of “racialized violence” and relationships to Western colonization (Dickinson et al., 2005). Taylor (1998) noted that museum displays offering versions of “truth” often construct false narratives. Many museum displays induce processes of cultural forgetting (Biesecker, 2002; Black, 2009; Blair and Michel, 1999; Browne, 1999; Bruner, 2002; Dickinson et al., 2006; King, 2006). Marvin (1994) shows how in libraries and museums the body constitutes a site for social classification in and over which struggles for power and domination occur. Analyzing books bound in human skin and medical discourses rationalizing skin-book-binding, Marvin describes usurping of bodies, especially those of poor, illiterate individuals; feminized, they are doubly disempowered by their lack of social standing. Similarly, Cartwright (1998) details how “anatomy’s [violent] treatment of the female body [exemplifies ]… the repressive side of a broader cultural tendency to privilege women’s bodies as objects of visual pleasure” (p. 23).

Meanwhile, Linke (2005) pegs plasticized bodies exhibits as sites of transnational memory making. Linke emphasizes commodification of forgetting, tracing the psychosocial and political economic infrastructure of globalization that facilitates the normalization of violence through antiseptic displays of human remains. For exhibits that are globally marketed as both educational and entertaining, or edutainment (Burns, 2007; Jones, 2007), a long history of controversial cases exists (Dubin, 1999). Rony (1996) asserts that museums’ mainstays are “the exotic” (p. 6) made familiar. The following analysis will show that BTE represents global others by making what is alien appear as beneficial, non-
others, like a global Western *we*, which draws on discourses of “consubstantiation” (Burke, 1969). Here we expand upon Burke’s concept of consubstantiation, which connotes attaining identification between audience and persuader, by encompassing the cultural underpinnings common to transnational museum displays. Globalization discourses promoting “common difference” (Wilk, 1995, p. 118) express consubstantiation by using “we,” which persuades by “suggest[ing] the existence of shared purposes, without … providing evidence of any real commonality of interest” (Price, 2008, p. 2). This subset of globalization discourses represents “language and culture… [as] commodities… decontextualised, abstracted goods, whose purchase … [enables]… a culturally and linguistically unfettered process of capital accumulation on a global scale” (Jack, 2004, p. 126). Globalization discourses also tend to exhibit a “realist style” that packages statements and the entities that purvey them as “unbiased, frank, and … clear sighted,” (Markovits, 2009, p. 32). Of this style, which works well for purveying myriad aspects of globalization as benign, such “claims hide … strategic selection of evidence to get … representations that serve its interests” (Markovits, 2009, p. 39). As we shall demonstrate, BTE displays bodies in this context.

**Bodies Exhibits**

Several plasticized bodies exhibits have emerged since the 1990s, as Body Worlds premiered in Tokyo in 1995, followed by other exhibits such as Our Body: The Universe Within, Bodies Revealed, and BTE. As these exhibits have drawn many visitors, they have also drawn critiques, including questions about the ethics of commodified display of humans bodies (Burns, 2007; Connor, 2007; Dolce, 2010; Raikos et al., 2012) and concerns about costs of human labor in their creation (Cloud, 2010) and representations of gender (Davidson et al., 2009). Indeed, an entire volume of essays has focused on critical examination of various issues of significance in the consumption and production of Body Worlds (Jespersen et al, 2009). Meanwhile, more pointed responses have questioned use of undocumented bodies and, more specifically, use of undocumented Chinese bodies within largely
Western exhibition contexts (Benedetti, 2008). While Body Worlds has publicly committed not to use undocumented Chinese bodies, questions have arisen about other exhibitions such as The Universe Within, which acknowledges China as a place of origin for bodies (Institute for Plastination, 2008a, 2008b). BTE has been particularly controversial for using Chinese bodies, particularly as ABC’s television news program 20/20 raised concerns about lack of consent for bodies (Ross et al., 2008).

Our analysis of BTE builds from visits to three BTE showings in 2008—at the Cincinnati Museum Center at Union Terminal in Cincinnati, Ohio; at the Carnegie Science Center in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; and at the South Street Seaport in New York, New York—augmented by study of print and web media photographs and marketing texts of BTE. The three visits produced 23.5 typewritten pages of field notes that we analyzed rhetorically for BTE’s framing discourses. The rhetorical analysis focused on BTE’s naturalization of plasticized human corpses through discourses that provided bases for audience consubstantiation with the bodies and body parts on display. For this particular analysis, we focused on ways in which these discourses both explicitly and implicitly invoked references to globalized flows of information, cultural practices, and the bodies themselves. After offering a general overview of the experience of BTE that highlights the exhibit’s major rhetorical frames, we will examine implicit understandings of death practices offered by BTE’s presentation of bodies, followed by examination of ways that BTE asks visitors to identify with the deceased human bodies on display. In the process, we emphasize the implicit and explicit understandings of globalization that occur within the discourses that BTE utilizes, and we demonstrate ramifications of the forms of rhetoric of globalization that BTE deploys.

**Visiting BTE**

Visitors experience BTE by winding through variously sized rooms in which cases of body parts and full-body exhibits constitute the bulk of the exhibition, with informational elements provided on stand-alone signs, cards within display cases, and signs on walls. Following an introductory entrance
room, dimly lit rooms proceed from one system of the body to another through the skeletal, muscular, nervous, circulatory, respiratory, digestive, reproductive, and urinary systems. After these rooms comes the darkened Fetal Development room, followed by a summary room, The Treated Body, that returns to the dim lighting. Each location also contains an attended booth at which one can ask questions, peruse books such as *Grey’s Anatomy*, and feel plasticized organs. At the end of the exhibition, in varying forms, sites allow viewers to leave comments.

In addition to these structural similarities, BTE exhibitions maintain the same thematic emphases among sites. Most explicitly, BTE offers fact-based, scientific discourse articulated through connections to medical knowledge, personal health, and education. In each BTE room, viewers witness extensive descriptions of how the featured body system works, with indication of how body parts or full-body models fit into that system. BTE frames information as the result of scientific observation and discovery—a claim that BTE also suggests by regular reference to the statement “To see is to know.” BTE also connects medical knowledge to personal health. For instance, in a case titled “Series of Thin Sagittal Sections,” BTE explains the usefulness of medical technology to viewers by stating, “Today, medical science is not only surrounding the body with machinery, but taking that machinery into the body itself.” Each site also explains and shows, through plasticized lungs, the dangers of cigarette smoking. In each instance, a cigarette pack appears by a sign reading, “On average a pack of cigarettes take three hours and forty minutes off your life…. *Leave your cigarettes here and stop smoking now!*” Here the exhibition requests that viewers take charge of their personal health, suggesting that the scientific medical information provided offers a significant basis for doing so.

The exhibition emphasizes an educational experience, most explicitly accompanying a final full-body model on a sign titled “Your Body” that states, “Take the knowledge gained from the Exhibition… use it to become an informed participant in your own health care. This involves … improving your diet or beginning … [to] exercise …. [and] partnering with your doctor to understand what you—and your unique body—need.” This sign characterizes the point of the entire experience as an invitation to
remember scientific medical information offered throughout BTE and incorporate it by engaging in practices that promote greater personal health.

BTE’s body displays emphasizing health and medical discourse match Victorian era museums’ tendency to show “the anatomized human body yielded its secrets to the dissecting … highly sexualized gaze of surgical medicine” (Bennett, 2004, p. 23)—a gaze that other bodies exhibits, such as Body Worlds, has utilized as well (Linke, 2005). For instance, BTE displays the body of a pregnant woman in the recognizable erotic Odalisque pose from classical art. Reclining, she has been sliced open to reveal her fetus inside, suspended in clear plastic for the viewer’s curiosity. While skin from the rest of the woman’s body has been removed, her breasts retain their skin. This skin bikini showcases breasts as fetishized body parts of women, thus inviting viewers to sexualize the female body on display. The display of the pregnant woman’s body does not confer agency or equal personhood to her as standing upright might; rather, her reclining pose appears to invite the viewer to relate to her as a sexualized object over which the viewer dominates physically. The pose becomes the incidental container for the woman’s body and serves as a kind of artistic enthymeme, one that forgoes cognitive engagement with the deceased woman’s personhood or humanity.

Death, Embodied Culture and the Controversy over BTE

Aside from sexy poses, the exhibit utilizes many bodies positioned in active sports poses and surreal or macabre funny poses, such as a halved body of a man who appears to be “high-fiving” his other half. Cultural concerns arise in the use of people’s bodies to create humorous public displays. Bodies used in these exhibits could have come from morgues without consent of the deceased or their families, or they could be victims of human rights abuses (Katz, 2008; Ross et al., 2008). Exhibition spokespeople and representatives of companies that provide the bodies attest that human rights of the deceased have been respected (Barboza, 2006). Still, the State of New York has ordered that BTE refund offended visitors and post a warning at the exhibit’s entrance indicating that the bodies may have
been obtained without consent, and the State Legislature of Hawaii has banned BTE from returning to Hawaii based on public complaints.

BTE also involves the (inter)cultural dilemma of the extraction of human remains from the deceased person’s own cultural milieu and subsequent insertion of those remains into an alien culture that ignores cultural prescriptions for handling sacred rituals for observing death, bereavement and the afterlife. Some, like bioethicist Lawrence Burns (2007), maintain that “trans[form]ing… corpses into … artworks violates human dignity by effacing the subject’s identity and basic worth as a unique human being” (p. 22). In terms of cultural death rituals, as Jeff Greenwald (2005) states, “these were human beings, and we have rituals for releasing our bodies back into their component elements, whether as soil, food, or energy. This … is why some viewers find the displays so uncomfortable. Something is missing: an acknowledgment of gratitude, or a space for contemplation” (p. 98). Despite BTE’s heavy reliance on the use of bodies of deceased Chinese persons, BTE omits mention of their origins and lacks deference to norms surrounding death in Chinese culture. Although scholars disagree on what constitute universal values, consensus suggests that universal values, including valuing the protection of the basic humanity of deceased persons’ remains, should apply to all cultures, persons, times, or viewpoints and should guide ethical choices across cultures (Bok, 1995; Kane, 1994; Kidder, 1994; Loges and Kidder, 1997).

Significant questions surround the lack of valid, documented evidence showing consent from the deceased or their families that BTE could use their dead bodies (Katz, 2008; Ross et al., 2008). Since BTE’s Chinese bodies may have been suspiciously procured, the bodies appear to be doubly condemned to further mutilation after death (Barboza, 2006; Katz, 2008). For human rights activists, plasticization, surgical cuts and dismemberment invoke senses of pain and torture (Barboza, 2006; Katz, 2008). Bettie Luke, an advocate with Chinese-American groups observes, "From a cultural perspective, especially since … [BTE’s] cadavers are from China, it feels like a gross violation…The willful use of putting a body on indefinite display … condemns the soul to wander the netherworld with no chance to rest” (as
cited in Benedetti, 2008, p.16). By not acknowledging the cultural implications of the procurement-to-
manipulation process, BTE hides the appearance that it has violated the cultural dignity of the dead
persons on display (Barboza, 2006).

For similar reasons, Dr. Gunther Von Hagens, the scientist who discovered the plasticization
process and who runs Body Worlds, has moved away from displaying Chinese bodies (Ross et al.,
2008). Since about 2005 Von Hagens has used only fully documented bodies of Europeans who, prior
to death, legally indicated a wish for the exhibition of their bodies in this manner (Barboza, 2006). After
death, subjection of these Europeans’ bodies to plasticization and shaping processes follows
documentation and death rituals in the Western cultural milieu. BTE’s Chinese bodies, however,
receive neither documentation nor death rituals. These two contrasting ways of dealing with dead
bodies invite an in-group bias. By default, BTE legitimizes specific intercultural behavior that benefits
Western self-interest or enhances an individualistic self, whether socially, economically, or politically,
regardless of whether it undermines the other party’s interests.

In intercultural interactions, at minimum the guest culture merits respect even though it is not
used to guide behaviors in all situations (Sizoo et al., 2003). Over thousands of years, China has
developed specific beliefs, cultural norms, and practices regarding death that not only reveal Chinese
people’s respect for the dead, but also exhibit their pride over and belief in human life. According to
Cooper (1998), in China’s Zhejiang Province, people still observe life-cycle rituals for celebrating new
life and honoring the dead. Honoring the dead invokes the following ritual: *song zhong* (family
members waiting by the bedside to attend to a dying person), *dai xiao* (attending relatives wrapping
white thread and hemp twine around the neck of the deceased for tying or fostering filiality), bathing and
dressing the corpse, encoffining, having a procession to the grave, and interring the corpse. Although
people in some parts of China do not practice the prescribed funeral ritual, alternatives still symbolize
family reunion and honoring of the dead. In stark contrast, BTE’s dead bodies pass through a series of
impersonal actions before being shaped into artificial postures that constitute insults to the dead and
their surviving family members. The respectful posture of the dead, with hands placed on the stomach, is flouted. The dead body is thus symbolically “re-murdered” multiple times during the plasticization process that skins the body and dips it numerous times into treatments of formaldehyde and plastic (Ramp and Conroy, 2009).

Moreover, in Chinese culture, manipulating dead bodies clearly breaches the family union. Chinese cultural tradition calls for honoring the dead by caring for dead relatives’ bodies, either through grave burial or through cremation with ashes boxed and stored in safe places. Reports indicate that BTE’s bodies belong to people who died in unusual ways, such as murder, accident, or court execution (Barboza, 2006; Benedetti, 2008; Katz, 2008; Ross et al., 2008). Families were unable to care for their remains, and the manipulation of the exhibited Chinese bodies, which amounts to another process of qian dao wan gua (to cut, slice, and butcher with a thousand knives or for a thousand times), would mean additional suffering for their families were they made aware of it.

Such manipulations of the exhibited dead bodies have implications for understandings of globalization. Economically, both China and the United States play important roles in globalization (Schiller, 2008). Having benefited in some ways from globalization, China’s economy has grown in the past two decades, rendering China a rising economic power (Schiller, 2008). However, while generating wealth and prosperity, globalization has also exacerbated social and environmental inequality and has created inequalities in the realms of political power and cultural knowledge (Dallmayr, 2002; Ono and Jiao, 2008). Schiller (2008) emphasizes that due to historical and political asymmetries, “we in the United States are not currently well placed to know our counterparts, the actually existing inhabitants of China” (p. 413). BTE represents another exploitation of Chinese people (Barboza, 2006; Katz, 2008) as it uses bodies of deceased Chinese people to offer edutainment via rhetoric of globalization that normalizes inequalities of wealth, power and knowledge and elides cultural knowledge of China.
“Common Difference” and Audience Identification in BTE

BTE draws on discourses of globalization through two specific rhetorical tropes: a consubstantializing “we” and a discourse of realism. Both tropes distract viewers from cultural difference so visitors can marvel at the bodies as culturally neutral, scientific objects. The discourse of “realism” serves globalization by representing the message’s originator as “honest” and “frank,” though it redirects audiences elsewhere (Markovits, 2009). BTE employs a realist rhetoric that purports to reflect the wider human experience but actually supports a cursory and superficial reflection, especially in terms of cultural difference, as it does not indicate that mostly Chinese bodies are displayed. Best (2005) emphasizes that interaction among diverse peoples in the globalized public sphere ought to be “visceral, lived, and subjective” (p. 232). However, glimpsing another human being’s sinews, bones, and veins, antiseptically cleaned and dried through plasticization, ignores the importance of respect for difference, diversity, and mutual coexistence among people (Catz, 2007).

While fact-laden discourses are persuasive, they alone do not guarantee identification between bodies being viewed and viewers. As one means of promoting audience identification, BTE emphasizes similarity of all humans across the planet. A sign in BTE’s first room defines the exhibit as such by alluding to global interest in studying the body. The sign states,

The study of human anatomy has always operated on a basic premise: to see is to know. This principle led Egyptian, Greek, Roman, and Islamic cultures to a more complete understanding of the human form. Public dissections during the Renaissance furthered this understanding, laying the foundation for … modern medical institutions and for this Exhibition.

References to historical cultures and scientific terms like “dissected human specimens” position viewers as passive students of a lecture who are less informed than expert exhibitors and are thus rendered malleable for realist discourse that prevails. Repeatedly, BTE states information about bones, muscles, organs, and other body parts as universalized fact so that one learns, for instance, that “bone is five times stronger than steel,” among many other factoids. Other statements emphasize human similarity more
explicitly. For instance, the last paragraph of the “Our Common Shell” sign by a full-body exhibit in the Digestive room intones, “We all share much more than a common shell... there is only .1 percent difference in the human genetic code between you and the person most different from you.” While directly interpelling the viewer as “you,” this passage also asks viewers to identify with the displayed body. By indicating that the viewer is, at most, only .1 percent different from the plasticized body being viewed, the sign asks viewers to recognize human difference but couches that difference within similarity. As the “Form + Function” sign near the end of the exhibition instructs, “What we have in common is a miraculous set of internal systems, each with its own precise role in how we function.” This sign implies that the internal systems seen in BTE constitute the basis for commonality and, thus, communality (Price, 2008). Normative use of “we” invites unity in a pan-cultural social order, even though the “we” displaces cultural differences between Chinese bodies on display and Western viewers.

BTE further promotes identification with the bodies by referencing common aspects of many Americans’ everyday lives. BTE references objects such as superhighways, computers, and cameras as means of conveying information to visitors. On the “Your Body” sign accompanying the final body displayed, a summary of the exhibit experience states, “We live in a world surrounded by technology, information, and cement.” This comment invokes realist discourse yet without recognition that its references privilege experiences tied to social class and geographical location. Other realist points emphasize issues of health that affect many viewers’ lives, either directly or through viewers’ acquaintances. Johnson (2008) has shown that in contemporary museum displays “healthism is pervasive” so that “the political economy of health [is] tied to broader mutations of capitalism…marketing and corporate branding” which further “marketing strategies…[conditioning] consumers to particular vocabularies, ways of viewing the world.” (p. 345). In BTE explanations of diseases and conditions accompany numerous body parts. While “healthism” through written realist messages appears to produce identification (Johnson, 2008), BTE also relies on visual stimuli to accomplish that task. Plasticized body parts illustrate for visitors effects of everyday practices, like
cigarette smoking or getting a tattoo. Such reminders of the health connections ask viewers to identify with the eviscerated bodies on display while eliding the bodies’ Chinese cultural origins.

BTE reinforces physical themes through the visual effects of adult full-body models in each exhibit room. The front of the program and websites marketing the exhibition do not rely on lone body parts to promote the exhibit; rather, they picture whole-body displays from the exhibit. For all of its disembodied parts, BTE works on the premise that identification requires that individuals see full bodies. Additionally, numerous full-body exhibits use sports as a means of consubstantiation, attempting to invite Western audience identification by placing bodies into poses that enact popular Western sports practices. For each posed display, a sign describes specific aspects of the body and common human uses of bodies. For example, the sign describing a body that is running while holding a football tells viewers, “Your skeleton moves when muscles contract and pull on your bones. This produces both highly coordinated movements, such as running while carrying a football, and relatively simple … movements, such as brushing your teeth.” In addition to the everyday activity of brushing one’s teeth, BTE embodies realism by referencing sports, which Westerners, and Americans in particular, use as socializing common discourse (Wood, 2008).

Yet not all sports are known to all Western audiences. In the United States, for instance, cricket does not have the national prominence that it does in other parts of the world, including Hong Kong. Similarly, table tennis, which is China’s most popular sport, maintains little prominence within the United States. BTE does not contain cricket or table tennis poses, nor does it contain bodies performing traditional Chinese sports like Tai Chi. Rather, BTE invokes sports references like football, basketball, baseball or soccer with which American audiences relate. In conjunction with the truth claims stated in the exhibit’s realist discourse, BTE implies that these sports are activities in which the body would naturally engage. In the process, the implicit worldwide promotion of organizations such as Major League Baseball, the National Basketball Association, and the National Football League becomes apparent, as the poses embody the notion that the United States provides the rest of the world with vital
activities to reconnect with themselves and the physical aspects of their bodies. When the exhibit links sports references to Western science, as when technologies like magnetic resonance instruments (MRI) and steroids are discussed along with American sports, BTE further naturalizes American global economic and social power. BTE thus promotes commonality as if all participants were equal, yet it does so in ways that place American viewers into positions of privilege over cultural others.

Conclusion

Like Devi’s story of “Douluti,” BTE provides an instance of public display of the deceased human body, yet BTE differs greatly in the deployment of such display. Douluti’s body offered a point of rupture for Shome (2006) to demonstrate commitment to reflexivity of one’s knowledge claims amid globalization, yet BTE offers quite the opposite. BTE deploys deceased human bodies alongside rhetoric of globalization that non-reflexively reinforces Western knowledge claims while eliding cultural differences and thus failing to account for complexities and politics of globalization. Respecting cultural integrity of dead bodies would mean, at a minimum, identifying each individual’s identity and providing documentation that BTE received legal consent to display each body. Additionally, sensitivity to intercultural respect would recommend treating BTE’s Chinese bodies with recognition of the context from whence they came. Culturally sensitive curatorial practices suggest that exhibits should incorporate cultural affiliations, community practices, languages and other factors involved in intercultural communicative exchanges within modern public museums. While not unproblematic, curatorial participation in planning and staging processes by representatives of cultures or nations on display might mitigate some intercultural concerns surrounding cultural displacement of death processes.

In both overt and hidden ways, BTE influences economic, political and social relations of viewers and of survivors of the deceased persons whose plasticized bodies are on display. As this case study has shown, BTE does not actively recognize intercultural awareness and respect, which is
especially problematic considering the money its dead bodies make for plasticizing organizations and for exhibitors. The discursive influences of globalization, especially references to commonality, enable viewership of BTE’s bodies as allegedly neutral objects. Our aim has been to acknowledge human difference, rather than to deny it. Until public forums like museums recognize and respect cultural differences, audiences will have difficulty appreciating differences among other human beings.

Denying difference abets globalization’s dehumanizing entailments (Ellis, 2008). This discussion has highlighted how one subset of the rhetoric of globalization—“commonality”—appears in BTE, often via what Markovits (2009) calls “realist discourses,” which guide this dehumanizing process. Some critics have boycotted museums that display mummies or preserved human remains. Others might urge cultural sensitivity while viewing BTE. We hope this critique encourages receptivity and accountability to basic measures of intercultural recognition among museums and other exhibitors. This essay focused on the sensory elements of BTE that correspond to hiding international cultural exchange. While insufficient space limited the breadth of our discussion, vexing human rights concerns warrant further exploration.

Change has already begun, starting with the attorney general’s office of New York State. By court order in May 2008, BTE “must now publicly admit that it does not know whether or not the cadavers come from tortured or executed Chinese prisoners. Premier [the bodies supplier] will also have to pay up to $50,000 in refunds to [offended] visitors and it cannot bring in new bodies without proper documentation” (Katz, 2008, p. 2). While the amount of refunds pales against the overall profits BTE has made in New York State alone, and while what constitutes “documentation” continues to be problematic, this at least constitutes some recognition of harm that exhibitors of BTE will need to consider. Further, Hawaii has completely banned BTE. Such actions highlight the inequity between Westerners and the “long-standing orientalist image and position of China…within… global power relations” (Ono and Jiao, 2008, p. 407). “Commonality” discourses that prevail in the rhetoric of
globalization both disguise and strengthen a variety of power disparities, perpetuating ignorance of China and other non-Western cultures.

This essay has been our contribution to pointing out one of the many ways that the rhetoric of globalization is characterized by specialized discursive, visual and technological tools that elide human diversity and rights. BTE and similar exhibits normalize the bizarre, macabre status of remains of deceased human beings, many of whom have been removed from their cultural contexts and posthumously utilized for edutainment and profit. Implications for the study and practice of critical intercultural exchange call for further inquiry into how the rhetorical processes of globalization operate in various milieus. Transnational forums that educate and entertain the masses bear further study, particularly as they frequently advance the interests of corporate and not always ethical exhibit backers (Johnson, 2008). Our discussion demonstrated that in settings such as museums identification constitutes a potent strategy and resource for rendering audiences malleable to those interests. The reduction of culture to a global monoculture (Doerr, 2008) in exhibits such as BTE reduces awareness of and ability to foster intercultural respect through globalized networks of social and market exchange. Drawing suasory strength from key tropes within the rhetoric of globalization, BTE’s “commonality” references actively deflect cultural and human difference issues from view. As such, BTE not only snatches up undocumented bodies, it embeds those bodies within rhetorical constructions that snatch up the intercultural understandings that could accompany the bodies. In doing so, BTE demonstrates how rhetoric of globalization emphasizing “commonality” also snatches from view potential ruptures to international power structures and to knowledge systems that maintain those structures, particularly as those power structures and knowledge systems perpetuate Western subjectivities. Such practices make all the more important critical work that brings such ruptures to light, providing a basis for seeing what is otherwise hidden.
References


Institute for Plastination (2008a) Body worlds, Gunther von Hagens’ original exhibitions of donor bodies not to be confused with copycat displays that use unclaimed and found bodies from China, http://www.koerperwelten.com/en/media.html


