

Introduction

The Museum of Medicine, claimed to be “arguably the most popular and influential medical museum in the United States” by Redman (2016, 9) houses more than 25,000 medical instruments, anatomical models, and human specimens (Alberti & Hallam 2013). Many of the specimens, which range from fractured bones to removed cysts to jars of picked human skin, present “highly unusual examples of bodily manipulation and disease” (Redman 2016, 127). The museum is also known full body skeletons on display, along with an extensive collection of wax models of faces displaying gangrene, syphilis, and cancer. Recently, the museum has come under fire for its possession of an Australian skull that had been brought to the museum after WWI (Daley 2017). It is in this institution, embroiled in controversy yet dedicated to educating the public about the history of human health, that I propose to conduct my thesis research.

Specifically, my research will examine how human body parts are given/gain meaning when on display in a museum setting. To explore this topic, I would like to interview Museum of Medicine staff and volunteers and observe museum visitors. These data will then be thematically coded for my textual analysis. My thesis research will be both an extension and combination of existing literature concerning meaning making in museums, how meaning is attained by the human body, and how human “waste” products (such as blood, semen, cysts, etc.) are given value. These three literatures have, as yet, rarely overlapped to explore how waste products are given/gain educational value in museum settings. My research will provide an intersection of these three literatures, thereby filling this gap of interdisciplinary work.

Research Questions

My research project explores how “waste” products (such as a removed gallbladder or peeled skin) are given/gain potential to teach and inform onlookers and researchers. I also would

like to explore if and how a museum setting potentially provides the context through which “waste” products are transformed into valuable specimens worthy of study. Going further, I am interested in exploring similar and differing connotations of calling something a body part, a “waste” product, and/or a museum specimen. Essentially, I want to look at how something removed from the body is given/gains meaning, specifically when on display.

Significance

I view my research as an extension of existing anthropological literature on how meaning is given to the human body, as well as to products of the body (such as blood, breast milk, urine, semen, etc.). My research will also draw from museum studies in looking at the how institutions give meaning to objects on display. However, my thesis research will also *contribute* to the existing literature, as there has been little intersection of these different studies thus far. My research will combine these various fields of study to come to a cohesive understanding of how meaning is made/gained by body parts on display in institutions.

Furthermore, my research will also be significant in in that it involves such a public and historical institution. In addition to the museum’s thousands of annual visitors, the Museum of Medicine also has an extensive online following on social media platforms such as on Twitter and Facebook. It is no longer necessary to be physically *in* the museum in order to engage with museum specimens and objects. Instead, an increasing number of people can now access certain parts of the museum’s collection, thus making the institution itself even more embedded in popular and academic culture.

Literature Review

Because I plan to conduct research on how people engage with and understand body parts displayed in the Museum of Medicine, my thesis will draw primarily from museum studies, theories of the body, and studies of body parts. Though there is a wealth of information pertaining to each of these three literatures, little research has been conducted involving the intersection of all three topics. My thesis research will instead utilize all three disciplines to explore how meaning is given to/gained by body parts in museums, thereby addressing this gap in the literature.

For example, existing museum studies literature is concerned mostly with how museums are a part of the “complex process of meaning making” (Moser 2003, 3), spaces to explore identity and citizenship (Kratz 2011), institutions embroiled in repatriation controversies (Gallagher 2010; Vidali 2015; and Smith 2004 are just a few examples), and spaces where race has been normalized through physical anthropology exhibits (Waters 1997). With the exception of Moser (2003), none of the articles listed above are concerned with the process of how non-human objects, much less body parts, are transformed into museum specimens, capable of providing knowledge to museum visitors and workers.

And while there is a great deal of literature on how meaning is given to the body (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987 provide a review of the existing literature), there is little research on how body *parts* are given meaning. Normally, what is found regards the commodification and trade of body parts (Sharp 2000 and Harrison 1998). When the literature *does* discuss body parts in institutional settings, the emphasis is almost always on the skull (Fabian 2010 and Quigley 2001). While these books and articles are helpful, they either do not

refer to body parts as objects displayed in a public institution, or they only discuss the display of body parts not considered “waste.”

This lack of a disciplinary intersection reflects the larger gap in anthropological research thus far: the literature does not mix museum studies with studies of the body. By working with the existing literature and combining their key elements and theories, my thesis will be working to fill that gap.

Methodology and Analysis

To fill this gap, I propose to investigate how workers at and visitors to the Museum of Medicine understand human body parts when detached from the body and put on display. To do this, I would like to observe museum visitors and speak with museum employees and volunteers in late January to early February, 2018. For observation: because I do not want to disturb visitor experience, I will sit in the museum for a few hours at a time to observe visitor reactions (such as audible exclamations, signs of disgust/intrigue, etc.) to specimens. I will make several trips to do so: once during a weekend, once in the middle of a weekday, and once during the late afternoon on a weekday. I want to vary the times I observe visitors in case certain days and/or times of the week determine the types of visitors the museum receives. I will handwrite my observations in a notebook that I will otherwise keep secure in my locked dorm room. Once my thesis has been accepted by my thesis advisor, these notes will be shredded.

For interviews: I also want to directly talk to and interview several museum staff and volunteers. These interviews will be semi-structured and will follow interview guides specific to the person’s classification (i.e., donors, curators, tour guides, and volunteers). These interview

guides can be found in Appendix A. These guides are a mixture of simple yes/no questions and longer, open-ended questions. In this way, I can provide structure to the interviews (thereby keeping interviews on topic) while allowing interviewees the flexibility necessary to provide information.

I am already in contact with several museum staff, all of whom I would like to interview. Additionally, I will reach out to other staff members via email with a recruitment script found in Appendix C. To uphold confidentiality, all emails to and from my informants will be deleted once my thesis is approved.

For the Collections Manager as well as other curators, I would like to focus my interviews on how they curate and display body parts in the museum, the donation process, and how body parts become specimens. I also want to talk about whether or not public perceptions of the museum influence what and how specimens are displayed.

I would like to speak to Visitor Services staff regarding how visitors engage with specimens. I also would like to talk to one or two volunteers about their experiences leading tour groups and teaching classes to visiting school groups. Like with the Visitor Services staff, I hope to discuss with volunteers how visitors engage with and understand the specimens on display. Security guards may also prove insightful regarding visitors. Finally, I am also especially interested in talking with the museum staff who have donated their own specimens to the museum about how they understand their bodies and body parts as potential sources of knowledge.

Prior to interviews, I will read aloud an informed consent statement. This statement can be found in Appendix B. If my interviewees consent, I will audio record these interviews. I

prefer audio recording to hand-writing notes because it helps me remember everything the informant stated on the record, which would help me later with data analysis. Additionally, though linguistic analysis will not be a major component of my thesis, audio recordings may prove helpful for me to track tonal variations of answers. Subtle aspects of speech may help convey meaning (like sarcasm or humor) that I could otherwise miss or forget without an audio recording. All of my recordings will be kept on a secure cloud computer drive provided by Bryn Mawr College. Like my handwritten notes, the interview recordings and their transcriptions will be destroyed once my thesis is approved.

Because these interviews will be audio recorded, I will need to transcribe each interview after it is conducted. These transcriptions will be saved in my password-protected OneDrive account provided by Bryn Mawr, and will, like the audio recordings, be deleted once my thesis is approved. This transcription will be helpful for several reasons. For one, having a written record of the interviews will make thematic coding, and therefore, the analysis, easier for me. Additionally, the act of transcription will allow me to engage directly with the data before I begin the more “formal” data analysis. Transcribing an interview before conducting the next is also helpful in that “preliminary reflections [. . .] can help modify data collection” because “research questions and topical foci are to some degree emergent” (Boellstorf et al. 2012, 161). In other words, engaging with the data before collecting more data will allow me to pursue new lines of questioning and topics I had not previously thought of.

At the advice of Boellstorf et al. (2012), most of my analysis will be conducted after collecting my data (162). This will include coding for recurring themes such as visitor reactions to displays, the process of putting body parts on display, the transformation of a waste product into one of educational value, etc. Finding patterns in these codes will help me analyze and make

sense of the data I collect. Codes may also include themes I have not yet thought of and/or encountered. Because of the nature of anthropological research, it is difficult to account for all possible themes and research questions before collecting data (160).

Ethics

Because of the inherent power imbalance between researcher and informant, I will take steps to ensure each informant knows that their participation is purely voluntary. Before each interview, for example, I will read aloud an informed consent statement (which can be found in Appendix B) specific to the person's classification (i.e., donors, curators, tour guides, and volunteers). Recognizing that informed consent is an ongoing process, each consent statement also includes the affirmation that informants can stop the interview at any time and may choose to not discuss specific topics or do so only off the record. In other words, informants will be made aware of the possibility to revoke their consent at any time. The informed consent statement also includes information on steps taken to ensure confidentiality. In this way, each informant will be given enough information to make an informed decision to participate in my research.

To protect the confidentiality of my informants, pseudonyms will be used in place of their real names. The museum will also be given a pseudonym, and only placed within the broader geographic area of the East Coast. Neither the informants nor the visitors I observe will be described in ways that could potentially identify them. Furthermore, it will not be possible to match the data I collect during interviews with the informants who provided that information.

To further protect anyone involved in my research, I will keep all of my data secure. My handwritten observation notes will remain in a notebook I will keep in my locked dorm room. These data will be shredded once my final thesis is approved in May 2018. Regarding my interview data, my audio recordings will be immediately transferred from the recording equipment to and saved in my password-protected OneDrive cloud account provided by Bryn Mawr College and then deleted from the audio recording device. My transcriptions will also be saved in my OneDrive cloud account. Once my final thesis is approved in May 2018, all these data will be deleted from the OneDrive. Additionally, all emails to and from my informants and the institution will also be deleted once my thesis is approved.

Budget

Though it is impossible to know for sure how much my research will cost, I have an estimated range of \$108.00 - \$118.50. The easiest cost for me to calculate at this time is the cost of a Museum of Medicine student membership. This membership costs \$35, and is the most economical option for me because non-members must pay \$13 for each visit. Since I plan on visiting the museum more than three times, the student membership saves me money. Also simple was finding an estimate for my thesis binding, which comes to around \$11, based on the Office Max website.

The least exact budget item is the travel cost. Because I do not yet know the exact dates of my visits to the museum, I am unsure how many SEPTA trips I will make on the weekends versus the weekdays. I do know that at minimum, I will need to visit the museum for at least one day over the weekend to observe weekend visitors and at least two different weekdays to observe

weekday visitors. However, the dates of the rest of my museum trips are variable and dependent upon the schedules of my informants. Thus, I have a flexible range to account for the travel costs of different days of the week. To account for any possible variation in travel cost, my travel estimates are based on a total of 10 museum visits. Though an extremely liberal amount, predicting a maximum of 10 visits helps to account for more conservative and realistic visit counts. For a full breakdown of my budget estimates, please see Appendix D.

Conclusion

By observing Museum of Medicine visitors and interviewing museum staff and volunteers, I propose to study how human body parts are given/gain meaning when on display in museum contexts. My research will address a gap in the existing literature, where museum studies, body studies, and studies of body parts have not been fully combined to understand body parts on display. Additionally, by researching an institution embedded in popular and academic culture, my findings relate to broader issues of how museums treat and display bodies and their parts, how “waste” products are understood by the public, and how nonnormative bodies are treated by others. In other words, because the Museum of Medicine influences and is influenced by popular culture, my research will also relate to contexts outside of such a unique institution.

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Appendix A: Interview Guides

Curators

1. What does a typical day at the museum look like for you?
2. How do you decide *what* to display?
3. How do you decide *how* to display in the museum? What factors go into displaying human body parts?
4. What do you hope museum visitors learn/take away from your displays?
5. What is your favorite body part on display and why?
 - a. If you could change how it is displayed, would you?
 - i. If so, how would you change it?
 - ii. If not, what makes the display so effective?
6. What is your favorite body part display and why?
 - b. If you could change it, would you?
 - i. If so, how would you change it?
 - ii. If not, what makes the display so effective?
7. A lot of the specimens on display (gallbladders, cysts, etc.) usually end up as medical waste when they are separated from the body. Do you view these specimens as “waste”? Why or why not?

Tour Guides

1. What types of tours have you led?
 - a. After Hours Private Tour/Guided Tour/Classroom Lesson/Other
2. What do you like about the tours?

3. If you could change the tours, would you? If yes, how so?
4. Have you helped design a tour?
 - a. If so, how did you decide what to include on the tour?
5. What is your favorite body part to discuss in your tours? Why?
6. How do visitors generally react to/have most recently reacted to your favorite body part?
7. What is your favorite body part display to discuss in your tours? Why?
8. How do visitors generally react to/have most recently reacted to your favorite body part display?
9. What specimens get the most attention during visitor tours? Why do you think that is?

Volunteers

1. What does a typical day at the museum look like for you?
2. Why volunteer here?
3. What is your favorite body part on display and why?
 - a. If you could change how it is displayed, would you?
 - i. If so, how would you change it?
 - ii. If not, what makes the display so effective?
4. What is your favorite body part display and why?
 - a. If you could change it, would you?
 - i. If so, how would you change it?
 - ii. If not, what makes the display so effective?

Donors

1. How did you obtain this specimen?

2. Why did you donate to the museum?
3. Would you donate again? Would you recommend others to donate body parts?
4. Is your donation on display?
 - a. YES:
 - i. How do you feel when you see your own body part on display?
 - ii. Did you help decide how to display it?
 1. If so, how did you decide?
 2. If not, would you change how it is displayed? How so?
 - iii. What do you hope visitors learn from your specimen?
 - b. NO:
 - i. Why do you think it's not on display? Was it your choice?
 - ii. If you would like it on display, how do you envision it to be shown?
5. How does it feel to have contributed a specimen to this museum?

Appendix B: Informed Consent Script

For Curators:

Hello, my name is [name] and I am a student doing research for my undergraduate thesis in Anthropology. Thank you so much for taking the time to meet with me.

I am interested in knowing about your experience curating body parts at the Museum of Medicine. We will be talking about how meaning is given to/gained by body parts and the process of displaying body parts. This interview should take about 45 minutes. You can stop the interview at any time, and not answer any questions you don't want to answer. You may also speak off the record and ask me not to record certain topics in the interview. No one will be able to link your answers with your identity, including anyone you work with. I will destroy these notes once my thesis is accepted by my advisors in May 2018.

There are no direct benefits to you for participating, though you may find it interesting to share your experiences working with human body parts. There are no foreseeable risks to you in participating in the interview; the risks are no greater than what is experienced in everyday life. And if you do feel uncomfortable, you may stop the interview at any time.

If you have questions about my research, you can contact my advisors, Melissa Pashigian at mpashigi@brynmawr.edu and Maja Seselj at mseelj@brynmawr.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you can contact Leslie B. Alexander at laalexand@brynmawr.edu or 610-520-2635. She is Chair of the IRB (the committee at Bryn Mawr College which reviews all research involving research participants).

With your permission, I would like to audio record your interview. This will help me remember everything that you said. This recording will be kept in my password-protected OneDrive

account provided by Bryn Mawr College and destroyed when my thesis has been accepted by my thesis advisor in May 2018. Would this be okay with you?

Would you like to receive a copy of this script for obtaining your waiver of written informed consent?

Are you ready to begin?

For Tour Guides:

Hello, my name is [name] and I am a student doing research for my undergraduate thesis in Anthropology. Thank you so much for taking the time to meet with me.

I am interested in knowing about your experience with visitors of the Museum of Medicine. We will be talking about how meaning is given to/gained by body parts and how visitors interact with and understand body parts on display. This interview should take about 45 minutes. You can stop the interview at any time, and not answer any questions you don't want to answer. You may also speak off the record and ask me not to record certain topics in the interview. No one will be able to link your answers with your identity, including anyone you work with. I will destroy these notes once my thesis is accepted by my advisors in May 2018.

There are no direct benefits to you for participating, though you may find it interesting to share your experiences with museum visitors. There are no foreseeable risks to you in participating in the interview; the risks are no greater than what is experienced in everyday life. And if you do feel uncomfortable, you may stop the interview at any time.

If you have questions about my research, you can contact my advisors, Melissa Pashigian at mpashigi@brynmawr.edu and Maja Seselj at mseelj@brynmawr.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you can contact Leslie B. Alexander at laalexand@brynmawr.edu or 610-520-2635. She is Chair of the IRB (the committee at Bryn Mawr College which reviews all research involving research participants).

With your permission, I would like to audio record your interview. This will help me remember everything that you said. This recording will be kept in my password-protected OneDrive account provided by Bryn Mawr College and destroyed when my thesis has been accepted by my thesis advisor in May 2018. Would this be okay with you?

Would you like to receive a copy of this script for obtaining your waiver of written informed consent?

Are you ready to begin?

For Volunteers:

Hello, my name is [name] and I am a student doing research for my undergraduate thesis in Anthropology. Thank you so much for taking the time to meet with me.

I am interested in knowing about your experience volunteering at the Museum of Medicine. We will be talking about how meaning is given to/gained by body parts on display at the museum. This interview should take about 45 minutes. You can stop the interview at any time, and not answer any questions you don't want to answer. You may also speak off the record and ask me not to record certain topics in the interview. No one will be able to link your answers with your

identity, including anyone you work with. I will destroy these notes once my thesis is accepted by my advisors in May 2018.

There are no direct benefits to you for participating, though you may find it interesting to share your experience of volunteering at the museum. There are no foreseeable risks to you in participating in the interview; the risks are no greater than what is experienced in everyday life. And if you do feel uncomfortable, you may stop the interview at any time.

If you have questions about my research, you can contact my advisors, Melissa Pashigian at mpashigi@brynmawr.edu and Maja Seselj at mseelj@brynmawr.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you can contact Leslie B. Alexander at laalexand@brynmawr.edu or 610-520-2635. She is Chair of the IRB (the committee at Bryn Mawr College which reviews all research involving research participants).

With your permission, I would like to audio record your interview. This will help me remember everything that you said. This recording will be kept in my password-protected OneDrive account provided by Bryn Mawr College and destroyed when my thesis has been accepted by my thesis advisor in May 2018. Would this be okay with you?

Would you like to receive a copy of this script for obtaining your waiver of written informed consent?

Are you ready to begin?

For Donors:

Hello, my name is [name] and I am a student doing research for my undergraduate thesis in Anthropology. Thank you so much for taking the time to meet with me.

I am interested in knowing about your experience donating to the Museum of Medicine. We will be talking about how meaning is given to/gained by body parts and the process of donating body parts. This interview should take about 45 minutes. You can stop the interview at any time, and not answer any questions you don't want to answer. You may also speak off the record and ask me not to record certain topics in the interview. No one will be able to link your answers with your identity, including anyone you work with. I will destroy these notes once my thesis is accepted by my advisors in May 2018.

There are no direct benefits to you for participating, though you may find it interesting to share your experiences with donating your own specimen. There are no foreseeable risks to you in participating in the interview; the risks are no greater than what is experienced in everyday life. And if you do feel uncomfortable, you may stop the interview at any time.

If you have questions about my research, you can contact my advisors, Melissa Pashigian at mpashigi@brynmawr.edu and Maja Seselj at mseelj@brynmawr.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you can contact Leslie B. Alexander at [lalexand@brynmawr.edu](mailto:lexand@brynmawr.edu) or 610-520-2635. She is Chair of the IRB (the committee at Bryn Mawr College which reviews all research involving research participants).

With your permission, I would like to audio record your interview. This will help me remember everything that you said. This recording will be kept in my password-protected OneDrive

account provided by Bryn Mawr College and destroyed when my thesis has been accepted by my thesis advisor in May 2018. Would this be okay with you?

Would you like to receive a copy of this script for obtaining your waiver of written informed consent?

Are you ready to begin?

Appendix C: Recruitment Script

Hello _____,

My name is [name]. I am a senior Anthropology major at Bryn Mawr College. I am conducting research for my thesis on how meaning is given to/gained by body parts on display. With your permission, I would like to interview you about the body parts on display at the Museum of Medicine. If this interests you, please contact me at [email] to set up an appointment.

I look forward to hearing from you,

[name]

Appendix D: Budget

Item	Explanation	Cost
Travel Cost	I will be taking the Paoli/Thorndale line to get to and from the museum. I will be making at most 10 trips to the museum. At minimum, I will travel to the museum at least once on a weekend. At maximum, I will travel to the museum around nine times on the weekends. Because each weekend trip will cost \$10.50 (there and back), my weekend travel cost will range from \$10.50 - \$94.50. During the week, zone 3 tickets cost \$6 each, making a round trip costing \$12. At minimum, I will be traveling twice during the week. At maximum, I will travel to the museum around eight times a week. This brings my weekday travel cost to range from \$24.00 - \$96. Therefore, the range of my total travel costs comes to \$106.50 - \$117.00: $(8 \text{ weekend}) + (2 \text{ weekday}) = \\$84.00 + \\$24.00 = \\108.00 $(1 \text{ weekend}) + (9 \text{ weekday}) = \\$10.50 + \\$108.00 = \\118.50	\$108.00 - \$118.50
Membership Fee	I will purchase a student membership to the Museum of Medicine. Each student membership costs \$35, which is more economical than paying \$13 for each visit.	\$35
Thesis Binding	Office Max provides an estimate of around \$10 to bind a thesis of 70 pages using black and white ink. This estimate also includes a clear front and back cover. Adding tax brings the cost of thesis binding to around \$11.	\$11
Total		\$152.50 - \$163.00

Appendix E: Institutional Permission