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Other Bodies: Deconstructing visual binaries by subverting visual representations of the Other

By

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University of Louisville

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Intro:

Throughout history, monsters, both as they are categorized and identified, have served a purpose in understanding the boundaries of the culture they navigate. Although modern categorizations of monsters see them as purely fictional, monsters continue to maintain their utility through their alterity and amorphous nature. Monsters can be visualized in a multitude of ways that communicate their unique occupation in the realm beyond the known. In this unknown, they are their most powerful, transgressive selves. Through existing beyond and confusing our understandings of “safe” and “dangerous” monsters exemplify how the body, human or otherwise, can be utilized as its own story. As a result of this rich history and multifaceted use, monsters have been defined and labelled as anything from extraterrestrials to abnormally large animals. Due to this paper primarily being concerned with the other, the functioning definition of monsters will be simplified as anything that transgresses the boundary between animal and human.

Thus, it is my goal throughout both this paper and through the creation of my sculpture to examine how monsters are constructed within western culture, and to then utilize these aesthetic categories to create something which occupies a space outside of the known while still being familiar. For example, my sculpture, *The Avian* (Index 1-5), aims to exist as an “other,” which as it is defined within the parameters of this paper, is something sentient that can be placed in no one category of animal, human, or monster. By deconstructing the boundaries among animal, human, and monster, *The Avian* expands visual categorizations of sentience and, as a consequence, how individuals see humanity.

Process and Materials:

Before getting too involved in the theoretical aspects of *The Avian*¹, I want to take a step back and first describe the physical process of creating the sculpture to illustrate the thought processes behind the curation and selection of physical materials.

The Avian² is moveable but not by automated processes like an animatronic, rather their movement capabilities are more similar to a large marionette or puppet. The body has no wearable aspects for movement, so in terms of puppeteering, the control of the body is more similar to a rod puppet – akin to the Muppets. Much of the puppet's hard material decisions were made to maintain a maximum amount of flex and possibility. Since flexibility was the goal of the sculpture, the physical fabrication of the sculpture was separated into three distinct processes of creation: armature, musculature, and skin.

The armature creates “bones” that allow for controlled bending of the arms and legs, while also maintaining the stability of the body and creating anchorage points for the musculature. To make sure that the body remained relatively lightweight and easily transferable, the bones for the arms and legs were made out of wood while interlocking hinges and hand-crafted rod joints – similar to the ball joints used in dolls – were utilized at the elbow and knee joints. Bones were not created for the torso of the sculpture as the use of dense, moldable upholstery foam allowed for organic bends similar to what one would expect for a spinal cord. Additional organic flexibility was incorporated into the sculpture by creating a slight weight difference between the legs and the torso. This weight discrepancy was achieved by the use of wooden armatures in the legs, which had the additional benefit of stabilizing the bulk of the sculpture.

1. *The Avian*, italicized, refers to them as a sculptural being
2. The Avian, unitalicized, refers to them as an individual being



Unlike the limbs, the neck's boning was created using a plastic, 16 mm water hose that had articulated ball joint connections. I separated the ball joint connections so that the neck was shortened to a proportional length to the body. The last segments to receive armatures were the hands and feet of The Avian. Fingers and toes were created purely out of shaped Styrofoam that was threaded onto 1/16" wire and connected back to the wooden armature to create wrist joints (fig.1).

For the musculature, the primary material used was 1-2 inch upholstery foam. The range of dense foams allowed for lightweight bulk with a level of give that was necessary to create the illusion of flesh while allowing the wooden armature underneath to bend. The layers of foam were adhered to the wood with melt-hot adhesive, but as the shapes got more organic and intricate they were held in place using dressmaker pins so that they could hold a relatively strong connection. The last step of completing the musculature was to lock in all of the foam and pins by hand sewing a black, four-way stretch fabric around the body of the sculpture (fig.2). This preliminary skin could be likened to fascia, otherwise known as the layer of connective tissue between the skin and muscle. The four-way stretch fabric not only created a stronger hold so that the foam doesn't shift out of place nor split apart but also created a cohesive surface onto which the skin layer could adhere.

The final material step, the skin, involved brushing on liquid latex while fully saturating the fabric and foam to insure the strongest possible connection. This way when the body is bent and contorted the latex skin would have some added tensile strength that prevents excessive tearing. After this process was complete, because the latex skin was black, I was able to trace out patterns for where the fur and feathers would be on the body. The fur was attached to the body using a combination of adhesive and hand-sewing, while the feathers were placed into the fur by trimming the shafts, heating the endings, and linking them into the furs. Since all of the materials used were synthetic, they connected in a process similar to putting extensions in human hair.



Design Stage:

For as much as the “hard” material process shaped how The Avian was visualized, an equal amount of influence can be attributed to the “soft” design process. Soft design primarily references the research and development stage where initial creations were sketches of possible aesthetic and physiological choices. Because The Avian’s visual categorization as an “other” was an integral part of their story, it was important throughout the design process to maintain a certain level of believability while still creating a sense of otherworldliness. This started with examining monsters as they intersect with animal aesthetics such as werewolves, mere-folk, and minotaur. It was from this initial research that the animal aesthetics chosen were avian because

the lack of bird-monster archetypes in the west meant that the creature would not immediately be linked to cultural monsters in the same way deer or canine aesthetics might.

A lack of avian or bird monsters does not mean an absence, and so from aesthetic selection, popular cultural imaginings of avian monsters such as Harpies, Kenku (Dungeons and Dragons), and Rito (Legend of Zelda) were utilized as jumping-off points for subversion. In the case of the Rito and modern-day Kenku, who both exist as cultured “races” rather than just as mindless, monstrous encounters, these characters provided a pre-established visual for a “cultured” monster. They exist not as others within the parameters of this paper, because their designs still largely conform to typical human markers of culture and sentience. They wear a variety of clothing, with the Rito particularly wearing an array of scarves, shirts, and pants despite still being covered in feathers/fur. A few of the female Ritos (Index 6) also have crests resembling hair in addition to adorning themselves with earrings while the males (Index 7) might instead have braids. Addressing specific attributes of Kenku (Index 8) is far more challenging due to the nature of D&D and each character being unique to the players' needs; however, both their official lore and character portrait have the notable feature of both their hands and feet being talon-like, thus rendering them all incapable of flight. A lack of wings is noteworthy because the Kenku’s avian attributes subvert typical visualizations of the bipedal avian’s silhouette. Bipedal avians usually fall into two groups, bipedal with wings in place of arms, or wings and arms. The Rito fall into the first category, though their wings distinguish themselves by also doubling as dexterous fingers.

The surveillance of popular avian tropes established the main influential aesthetics for the design of *The Avian*. These aesthetics apply primarily to the creation of a bipedal avian body and the incorporation of manipulated bodily proportions through the employment of digitigrade legs,

the elongation of the torso in addition to the arms, and the enlargement of the ribs. Physical manipulation aided in creating a balance between the realm of the known and the unknown. A secondary aspect of the body itself was how to implement components like feathers and fur while not falling within the two major displays of avian creatures. This was achieved in two ways, having a distinct absence of literal wings that was instead replaced with arms appear that as though they have a typical human function, but when bent have a structure that is distinctly similar to a bird's wings and the dedicated placement of fur and feathers around the face as a distinct visual inversion of a vulture or ostrich-type bird.

Due to the nature of *The Avian* existing within a primarily artistic context, it is necessary to note that the visual culture they navigate was a significant influence on the design choices made during the creation process, however, it was not the only influence. A larger question at hand that has gone largely unaddressed is, why must *The Avian* exist as a subversive being, outside of the aesthetic utility of defamiliarizing the audience to create the other?

The answer can, in part, be found through the lens of viewing I approached this work with: decoloniality. Explained best in Mooniq Shaijee and Christopher Stroud's article, *Fanon in Drag*, decoloniality is a deconstructive framework that responds to coloniality. Coloniality survives colonization and, "refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production" (Shaikjee & Stroud 372). Intrinsic to western culture is the transformation of bodies through gendering, racialization, and sexualization to establish the boundaries not only of humanity, but also the aesthetics of beauty and normalcy. Shaikjee and Stroud focus primarily on how queer performance utilizes parody to "disrupt coloniality of gender or sexuality, by showing that they

are in no way ‘natural’ or stable, as we are led to believe” (373). In their analysis, subversion acts as an accessory to a primarily comedic art form that can exist within a decolonial context.

In applying this lens to my work, subversion now acts as the primary mode of transformation and builds upon the tradition of utilizing hybridity as a means of creating the other. Take for example Juliana Huxtable’s 2019 installation *ZOOSEXUALITY*, specifically her *Cow* (Index 9,10) series. Her *Cow* series focuses on a hypersexual cow hybrid and through the utilization of the grotesque (exaggerated bodily proportions, the inclusion of excrement alongside exposed genitalia and breasts) she dismantles the racial, hypersexualized feminine form. Even the main axis point of femininity is deconstructed by including horns, a trait typically associated with male bovines, alongside atypical feminine sex traits. Another notable aspect of decolonial works that are present in this series is that the grotesque is not axising itself on the confusion of gender markers, or the obfuscation of race through the use of body paint. The grotesque is entirely facilitated by exaggerating the function of sexualized organs like breasts, or by the contrast of having a vagina displayed next to excrement. These choices are relevant to decoloniality because the grotesque and defamiliarity serve to deconstruct modern categories of race, gender, and sex in service of creating new understandings of those identifying labels.

An important note when examining Huxtable's work through the lenses of decoloniality is that she never explicitly cites this as an inspiration or explicit theme in her works. Despite the lack of explicit application, this lens remains relevant as in an interview with Caroline Busta and @LILINTERNET of Art Basel, Huxtable expresses the following:

I find a lot of the questions around representation and identity to be really literal, discussed in terms that can only operate under set, didactic rubrics. And I feel like if you’re going to talk about gender or the intersection of gender, race, and representation –

at least insofar as art, or my art, has to answer this – it's more interesting to just go trans-species. (Busta and @LILINTERNET)

Regardless of the internal theory of her work, Huxtable defines her trans-species creations in a way that illustrates the decolonial theme of deconstruction of the known and a formulation of new from the vestiges of old systems. The trans-species entity and The Other operate similarly while utilizing opposite aesthetics because the trans-species body grounds itself in more overtly human aesthetics. This differs throughout the installation, but in terms of the *Cow* series, *Cow 3* maintains overt human physicality while minor bovine aesthetics (horns, ears, coloration) disrupt our perception of humanity. *Cow 1* differs in that it utilizes a traditional centaur's physiology, thus making the bovine the more dominant aesthetic with human accents. In comparison to the Other, as it applies to *The Avian*, the trans-species entity utilizes humanity as a stage. This is to say that the maintenance of primarily human identifiers is integral to their othering while The Avian utilizes human aesthetics as a familiarizing facade. The *Cow 1* and *Cow 3* still have striking access points of humanity such as the placement of the eyes, nose, and mouth. Specifically, the eyes themselves remain entirely human. The Avian denies these access points and rearranges/omits specific facial identifiers (fig. 3). This is not to criticize Huxtable's work, so much as it is a highlighting of the opportunity to expand upon pre-established explorations of



the Other and further push the limits of which aesthetics contribute to the acknowledgment of sentient and thus human bodies.

The Avian:

Huxtable's work establishes a framework of how *The Avian* navigates relevant fieldwork in the arts, in addition to demonstrating how the theoretical framework of decoloniality contextualizes the way I approached the visual and literary components of my work. Decoloniality serves as a lens through which all the visual and literary

information I navigated was filtered through. Understanding the context of how decoloniality is being applied, in addition to its main tenets, creates a frame that adds complexity to how *The Avian*'s aesthetics navigate western cultural categorizations of race, gender, and sex.

Race, or *The Avian*'s lack thereof, is an important distinction to take note of first because Race not only recontextualizes how bodies are gendered and sexualized, but it also changes how bodies are valued and categorized. Race has a long history of facilitating both the creation and recontextualization of monsters. For a modern example, Bernadette Marie Calafell in her book, *Monstrosity, Performance, and Race in Contemporary Culture*, utilizes *Twilight*'s (2008) representation of werewolves as a means to note how their Indigenous connotation in the series reflected the "noble savage" stereotype, especially when contextualized against the more "cultured" vampires. Race also has its roots in creating racialized "others" by way of leveraging

blood (im)purity as a way to frame hybridity as a deconstructive threat against an otherwise binary system. To re-establish binary labels as logical, there is then the introduction of more racialized categorizations like “mulatto.” The pervasiveness of racialization in western culture and pop culture highlights the difficulty in disengaging the legacy it has in informing visual categorization of bipedal or pseudo-human forms. In attempting to navigate this, *The Avian* first omits the inclusion of traditional human skin colors and instead has both a multi-colored face and body. The dominant color aesthetics of The Avian’s skin is black, with semi-iridescent blue highlights appearing as patterning on the ribs and as a part of the tonality of the skin (fig. 4). Carrying over from their face, The Avian’s feet and hands are also accented in red while the white coloration remains focused solely on the face. Though the inclusion of dark skin can be racializing in it of itself, the inclusion of gradated there is for humans. Human skin, generally speaking, has a range of gradients that exist within a tonal family and rarely have radical shifts in coloration in the same way that animals' fur might. In including an array of throughout both the fur and body, The Avian’s bodily categorization then becomes more complex- perhaps there is no one true color of their skin. Perhaps the iridescence glimmers across their skin are in fact their

true coloration, but our eyes fail to see their full range of gradation and thus they appear more muted to us.

The lack of racialized traits and defiance of racial categorization helps add complexity to how The Avian expresses gender and displays secondary sex characteristics. Returning for a moment to the discussion of “cultured” monsters in the soft design stage, the easiest design choice that is often made to show that something is not explicitly human but still sentient is to adorn them in clothing or accessories. The utilization of clothing and accessories to represent a civilized culture presents two operative problems; the first is that it reaffirms human cultural markers as inherently superior, and the second is that these design choices are still wholly influenced by the consumption of a pre-existing culture. The reaffirmation of human cultural



markers as representing something inherently “civilized” then returns to the affirmation of colonial ideals. Take for example, the western medieval archetype of the “Wild Man,” an unclothed and often hairy man who is narratively used to display “what could happen to anyone who did not conform to the strict social, moral or religious rules of society” (Wright 36). Although not first introduced in an overtly racialized context, the “Wild Man” provides a basis for the “Noble Savage” archetype and additionally highlights how clothing is not only used as a form of covering or protection. Clothing can also operate as a way of

belonging to an in-group. The second problem relates to the inclusion of clothes because, in terms of fictional cultures, the designs of those clothing are always derived from pre-established cultures. A good example of this particular form of cultural appropriation has largely been discussed in the context of high fantasy “races” such as “in World of Warcraft [which] can be interpreted as appropriating cultural identity and then refashioning it within the game world [such as] the Trolls hav[ing a] pronounced and unquestionable Jamaican accent and the Tauren with [Indigenous] architecture and dress” (Higgin 8,9). That being said, it is true that had The Avian been clothed, the design could have derived from more European aesthetics. However, that conformity would still be re-centering human standards of culture, rather than deconstructing those boundaries. It was for similar reasons that overt displays of decorative apparel (earrings, rings, bracelets) were also omitted. Instead, decorative elements were implied through the use of coloring the talons of the hands and feet red, and the upper teeth tucked behind their lips blue. The inclusion of those colors being natural to the rest of their body creates a sense of ambiguity as to whether or not these elements are naturally occurring, a product of performing gender markers, or if they are signs of cultural status. How these contradictions and complexities are noticed and questioned influences the viewer's perception of The Avian's otherness.

The Avian's lack of clothing also means that they deny one of the typical markers of gendered performance, because what the clothing covers is just as culturally significant as how they are designed. But this vulnerability introduced a complex problem regarding their sexualization and how this might be subverted on a bipedal figure. For as much as The Avian exists within a living, sentient context, their categorization as an art object can never fully be disengaged from the viewers' perception of their body, and thus, the option of leaving the groin

area wholly smooth could appear less subversive, and more as though the artist was discomforted by and avoiding the inclusion of primary sex characteristics. A simplistic solution would have been utilizing avian physiology and creating a cloaca; however, alternative modes of primary sex organs created a double bind in that they could often be boiled down to two aesthetic categories of yonic, or phallic imagery. This bind meant that the display of visually categorizable genitalia, despite a distinct lack of overt secondary sex characteristics, would simplify the subtlety of their gendered performance because of the greater hegemonic assumptions of what bodies display certain genitalia. These complications arose all without acknowledging how the artistic context of displaying exposed yonic genitals situates itself within an artistic context, which is to say that feminine bodies in the arts have historically been displayed in the nude for the vicarious eyes of male viewers. Because *The Avian* is meant to occupy the aesthetic category of a sentient other and not the monstrous, I wanted to avoid the inclusion of visceral depictions of the grotesque to combat *the gaze*. *The gaze* in this context primarily refers to the visual consumption of *The Avian* as it intersects with the various identities of the viewer, it takes the “body, [and] trap[s] it in a racial imaginary [that] is being governed by a pervasive white gaze that determines which bodies are valid, legitimate, deserving, and civil” (Rabelo, et al 1). Neither the white, nor male gazes can be broken apart because art objects are not solely viewed in one context, and so these identity categories are coalesced into *the gaze*.

The use of the grotesque as a means to disengage the viewer’s *gaze* is best exemplified by Huxtable’s *Cow I*, where the perception of monstrosity is disengaged by the trans-species entity’s greater use of human aesthetics. However, due to *The Avian*’s heavier visual use of animal aesthetics, the use of grotesque imagery risked upsetting the delicate balance between the realms of human, animal, and monster. To deny *the gaze* while still considering *The Avian* as an

artwork, the genitalia were both heavily abstracted and obscured from immediate viewer attention. The abstraction took place by adopting the sexualized visual of nipples, specifically the imagery of mammalian trait of having 6 nipples, and changing them into 6 soft, fleshy mounds that adorn the lower half of their groin area. The use of 6, rather than 2 (mimicking a bipedal pattern), is important because it borrows from the realm of the animal in a way that decentralizes avian aesthesis so that the sculpture once again deviates from simply being a Bird-monster archetype. Additionally, by utilizing a visual pattern typically associated with familiar things like pets, and changing the way that pattern is displayed defamiliarizes the audience with sexualized and un-sexualized body parts. Although the visualization of lumps on the groin could be considered grotesque since lumps on the groin of humans is often associated with illness, the uniform nature of the lumps, in addition to their lack of coloration, help to challenge the perception that these mounds are representative of some sort of malady or disease.

The gaze was not only challenged by a lack of fulfillment, but also in the posturing (physical display) of *The Avian*. Because there is “labor to be done in both the looking and the seeing. [And] vulnerability in reflection, in standing before yourself, and others, looking back,” in order to maintain a level of power and control in their visual consumption, *The Avian* must not only gaze back, but assert a level of aggression that implies retaliation to *the gaze* (Jones and Harris 522). The performance of aggression is important aspect of *The Avian*’s posturing because it reasserts their dominance in the face of the vulnerability created by having their nude body displayed for visual consumption, in implying the fulfillment of violence *The Avian* can, even if just for a moment, seem as though they are allowing themselves to be seen, rather than them having been forcefully put on display. Violence and aggression are implied by the intensity of their crimson eyes and the highlighting of physical weapons like their talons, and horns in red.

Although the display of aggression could be seen as fulfillment of a monstrous, animalistic, or even racialized dynamic of *the gaze* it is important to note that all these forms of aggression are implied, and it is by the same visual means of highlighting those dangerous aspects of The Avian that they are complicated as being predatory. They have horns, yes, but those horns are curled back and incapable of truly being utilized as a means of charging and piercing or locking and defending. The talons then become the only means of attacking, however even this performance is undermined because of a missing talon. It is the tension between the promise and fulfillment of violence that creates a delicate balance between negating both vulnerability and mindless, animalistic aggression.

The Avian's height also allows them to defy the gaze. Being 8ft tall allows them to deny the viewer a true meeting of the eyes face to face, negating the ability to “[see] into, physically penetrat[e] and manipul[at]e the living body” (Badley 67). In other words, the viewer's ability to see but not meet The Avian's eyes means that they are denied access to both their spiritual, and as a consequence, full bodily self. This denial of access then interacts with the visual themes of aggression that allows them to appear as though they are allowing the visual consumption, by combining these aesthetics choices The Avian has autonomy by denying the full commodification of their body.

Conclusion:

In reflection, *The Avian's* aesthetic confusion of the boundaries between the human, monster, and animal serve to create an other. Through centering the creation of the other on the subversion of both the visual and cultural norms of binary systems like of Race, gendered

performance, and sexualization, they establish the other as a deconstructive entity that adopts atypical visual signifiers and utilizes them as points of defamiliarization. The tension that the other creates between familiarity and the unfamiliar, highlights both the constructed nature of western cultural markers of humanity, and also questions how inherent these markers are/should be to the identification of sentient bodies. If we are to return for a moment to the idea of bodies as containers of stories, The Avian communicates that there are broader means through which to identify humanity. If we are to acknowledge this expansion in visual categorization, in addition to further pushing opportunities for subversion in our identification of the sentient other, then we can both begin deconstructing the vestiges of colonial thought that influences our culture, and, begin to formulate the new.

Image Index:



(Index 1): "Avian from the front," Crawford



(Index 2): "Avian from behind," Crawford



(Index 3): "Avian from the side," Crawford



(Index 4): "Avian head shot," Crawford



(Index 5): "Avian palms and talons," Crawford



(Index 6): "Female Rito," GamersParade



(Index 7): "Male Rito," GamersParade



(Index 8): "Kenku," Forgotten Realms



(Index 9): "Cow 3," Juliana Huxtable



(Index 10): "Cow 1," Juliana Huxtable

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