

nanoq: flat out and bluesome
A Cultural Life of Polar Bears

SNÆBJÖRNSDÓTTIR/WILSON

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Left
Carl Akeley with the
Akeley Pancake Camera

Skins of the Real: Taxidermy and Photography

Michelle Henning

In February 1882 the physiologist Etienne-Jules Marey wrote to his mother, saying:

I have a photographic gun that has nothing murderous about it and that takes a picture of a flying bird or a running animal in less than 1/500th of a second. I don't know if you can picture such a speed, but it is something astonishing.^{1/}

Soon afterwards he announced the instrument to the scientific world. Marey was not the first to invent a photographic gun – though his was the first that could capture motion using several very fast exposures on a revolving disk, and probably the first to look more like a rifle than a pistol. These cameras imitated the mechanisms and design of guns for practical reasons. For Marey's purposes the revolving mechanism was crucial, but the gun shape also enabled the camera to be hand-held and precisely aimed at its subject. Marey's gun camera was not a gun substitute, but a substitute for cruel vivisection. Marey opposed vivisection, but his discipline, experimental physiology, relied on it.^{2/} The gun camera was part of a whole battery of instruments he invented to avoid dissecting live animals. Even so, the fact that the camera looked like, and was held like, a gun, was related to its main use – for photographing animals, especially birds in flight. Fast shutter speed photography was made possible by its inventor's familiarity with the technology and practice of shooting with a gun.

The taxidermy pioneer Carl Akeley also invented a gun camera in 1914, a hand-cranked movie camera shaped like a machine gun. Two of these Akeley cameras were used to shoot Robert Flaherty's 1922 documentary, *Nanook of the North*. The Nanook of the title is not a bear, but an Inuit hunter. Flaherty described the film as "depicting the Eskimo and his fight for existence in the dramatically barren North."^{3/} In the film, the camera is to some extent a replacement for the kill; Flaherty told Nanook, "it is the picture of you hunting the iviuk [walrus] that I want, and not their meat". When the Inuit watched the film of the hunt the event had been changed: "For them, the walrus hunt meant food and life. Through the film they relived the excitement without the 'meat'."^{4/} Flaherty noted that the Inuit people soon saw "the practical side of film" and an unsuccessful polar bear hunt was embarked upon because it might prove a spectacular subject for the film.^{5/}

The gun camera changes the purpose of the hunt, the capture and the kill. Its existence also tells us something of the proximity of the gun and the camera in the imagination of their inventors. This association of cameras and guns lingers in the vocabulary surrounding photography and film today. In 1977 Susan Sontag described photographing someone as a kind of "soft murder."^{6/} Her view was echoed by Roland Barthes; in his book *Camera Lucida*, Barthes found death in photography over and over again. For him, the camera's ability to freeze a particular moment or scene, to make it eternal in all its particularity, is also its deadliness. The photograph "embalms" the living even as it shows the already dead in the fullness of life.^{7/} That is, photographs do not register the difference between people who are now dead and people who are still alive, yet by freezing a moment they make the living somehow dead – like the embalmed or taxidermied. Indeed, taxidermy might be more appropriate than embalming as

a metaphor for what photography does. The techniques associated with embalming human bodies enable the dead to be given a life-like appearance, for the duration of a wake and an open-casket funeral. But in its ancient forms, embalming was meant to preserve the substance, rather than the surface appearance of the body.^{8/} Taxidermy, on the other hand, is all about surface appearance and is made of the skin of the thing itself. Likewise, photography is concerned with surface appearance, and takes only the skin, the outward appearance, of the real.^{9/}

Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson's project, *nanog: flat out and bluesome*, brings together these two means of representation: photography and taxidermy. In doing so, it makes vivid their common characteristics. Both photography and taxidermy are technologies of preservation and deal in the frozen moment. Both are, in semiotic terms, indexes; signs which have a direct connection to the things they stand for. The bears are made out of the thing they represent, out of polar bears, or at least their skins (in older taxidermy, sometimes the skeleton was also used). The photographic negative records a direct imprint of the light falling on the film, which makes it indexical, even if the photograph relies on the interventions and manipulations of the photographer. However, the indexical sign may also be described as a sign which points to its own cause, or its conditions of production. Realist taxidermy and realist photography do not do this. Both pretend to be the thing they represent.

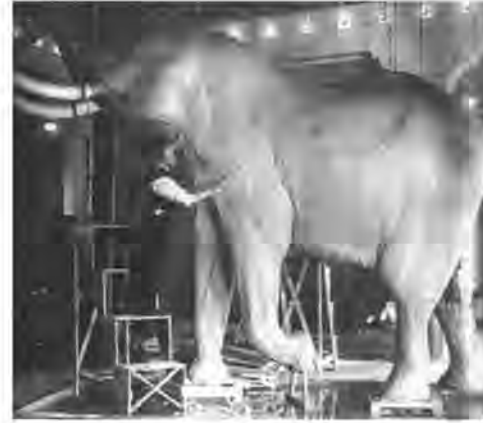
Regardless of how realistic they are, both taxidermy and photography have strong 'truth-claims'. In his various writings Roland Barthes repeatedly attempts to express the peculiar character of photography, a quality that marks it apart from other forms of representation (drawing, painting, writing). In *Camera Lucida* he explains it very evocatively:

It is as if the photograph always carries its referent with itself, both affected by the same amorous or funereal immobility, at the very heart of the moving world: they are glued together, limb by limb like the condemned man and the corpse in certain tortures;

or even like those pairs of fish (sharks, I think, according to Michelet) which navigate in convoy as if united by an eternal coitus.^{10/}

The living lug the dead with them, sex suspends lovers outside the passing of time, and a stillness in motion characterises the photograph's odd relationship to its referent. This is the tragedy taxidermy shares with photography, since it is made from the corpse of that which it depicts. The 'truth-claim' of a taxidermied animal is stubborn even if its appearance is sometimes unconvincing. Its truthfulness rests not on the mediation of machines, or of physics and chemistry but on the fact that it is, residually but fundamentally, part-formed from the animal itself. Sontag sees the act of taking a photograph as a sublimated murder because it is a predatory and objectifying process.^{11/} However, taxidermy owes its very existence to an act of violence or a death: its realism is deadly.

nanog: flat-out and bluesome invokes this deadly realism in its title. Flat-out, both dead and flatly represented; bluesome, like the bluish light and snow of the extreme north, but also melancholic. The tragedy of the polar bear is not just its hunting down, but also its sad resurrection as these taxidermy artefacts, and the indifference and forgetfulness associated with the places in which the artists find them. The photographic part of the project documents the fate of the taxidermied bears; the terrible incongruity of their surroundings compared to the icy place where they originate, and where their white fur would camouflage them. One bear keeps company with a grandfather clock, a mounted pheasant in a glass case, china polar bears, and a bust on a pedestal. In another photograph, the open front of a crate reveals a cub tightly fitted inside, like a foetus in a medical image. Everything in the room around it is half-opened, half taped-up, placed on metal storeroom shelving. Another bear stands in a brightly lit hall, holding flowers, amid baskets and dried grasses, framed pictures and stripped, varnished wood. One lies in a loft-space, with dirty fur, amongst a whole dusty jumble of stuff, including a rocking horse, bicycle, trunk, an old carpet and



Left
Carl Akeley carrying out
taxidermy, 1914.

a wicker or straw fan. This one is seemingly the most abandoned, but something is odd about the picture—the attic is viewed in cross-section—and it becomes evident that this whole arrangement is a contrivance, a display, in which the taxidermied bear stands for something, no longer anything to do with polar bears, but to do with junk.

Funny and melancholic, the photographs record the contexts of the bears, as *objet trouvé*, which the installation of the ten polar bears at Spike Island then took away. The installation also restored to the bears something of their original context, insofar as the white plinths, glass cases and white walls of the gallery stood metonymically for the arctic.^{12/} In this new context, which both groups and isolates the bears, the extent to which taxidermy mediates and represents polar bears, the differences between taxidermy styles, as well as what taxidermy can and can't tell us about polar bears, all become more evident. Museum displays usually divert viewers away from any consideration of taxidermy itself – as a preservation technique, an art, a means of education or a politically contested practice linked to hunting. In museums, polar bears are generally shown singly or in small groups, so it is difficult to make comparisons across specimens. *In situ* displays, such as dioramas, restore a slice of habitat to the bear. These give the taxidermy more contextual meaning, but also distract from it, by situating it within established conventions of

representation associated with the picturesque. In *nanog: flat-out and bluesome*, zoo bears and bears shot in the wild could be distinguished by close inspection of the claws, and the range of sizes of bears could be seen. Also types of taxidermy could be distinguished: one more realistic than another, another more well-worn or shabby.

In both taxidermy and photography, the smell of the bear, how it moves, its warmth, are all absent. Both are primarily made to be looked at. However, it is not entirely true that taxidermy was simply a way of representing animals in the pre-photographic era, which eventually became outmoded by wildlife films and by photography. Though taxidermy predates photography massively, realist taxidermy was born with and grew up with photography. Realist taxidermy is concerned with precisely emulating the external appearance of an animal. It is thus very different from the carapaces and hides stuffed with straw that passed for taxidermy in the eighteenth century. It is also different from the taxidermy now practised by hunters in North America and elsewhere, in which the prepared skin stretched over a standard, ready-made mould, resulting in animals that look uncannily similar to one another. Realist taxidermy is museum taxidermy. It began in the mid-nineteenth century, and peaked between the 1920s and 1940s, and is most closely associated with Carl Akeley who worked for several major US museums including the Natural History Museum in New York and the Field Museum

Skins of the Real: Taxidermy and Photography

Left

Carl Akeley carrying out taxidermy, 1914

Opposite

Jaguar Diorama at The American Museum of Natural History, New York



in Chicago. Since Akeley, museum taxidermy has been done by carefully measuring and photographing the corpse of an animal, and making a sculpture based on these specific measurements and photos. Casts of the sculpture are then taken, and used to make a hollow form, over which the skin is stretched.

The 'frozen' image, which both realist taxidermy and photography provide, responds to the desire to capture and preserve nature in the face of its gradual disappearance. Romanticism and natural history, both popularised in the mid-nineteenth century, represent the natural world as idealised and untouched. This is directly related to the destruction not only of the natural world, but of the world in which, as John Berger put it in his essay "Why Look at Animals?": "man lived among animals. He describes this as a "process... by which every tradition which has previously mediated between man and nature was broken."^{13/} The natural world was transformed into an object of visual consumption at the same time as it became firmly an object of scientific knowledge. Both realist taxidermy and photography are the products of a combination of encyclopaedism, in which the world must be collected and documented, and popular Romanticism, in which nature becomes a visual object of desire.

Didier Maleuvre has written that in taxidermy the violent domination of nature is itself re-presented as nature.^{14/} This can be seen most clearly in the dioramas, where a living, healthy animal is sacrificed in order to enable its perfect reconstruction as a mannequin inhabiting its own skin, for the purposes of an exhibit intended to inspire in its audience a love of nature and desire to protect it. Museum taxidermists and diorama artists used the techniques of Romantic painting to produce illusionistic scenes behind glass. Dioramas invite viewers to imaginatively enter an untouched natural world. Compiled into great halls, and arranged geographically, the dioramas expressed both the Romantic and the encyclopaedic impulses of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Discussing a book of animal photographs, Berger described how photographic technologies (including the fast shutter speeds which Marey called

"something astonishing") freeze for us a reality that we otherwise might encounter in glimpses or not at all:

In the accompanying ideology, animals are always the observed. The fact that they can observe us has lost all significance. They are the objects of our ever – expanding knowledge. What we know about them is an index of our power, and thus an index of what separates us from them. The more we know, the further away they are.^{15/}

This distancing is accompanied by idealisation. Nature becomes a value-laden concept set in opposition to repressive social institutions, a state we might return to, a place of freedom. In this context, animals and images of wilderness become objects of desire. Indeed the peculiar art of taxidermy can be thought of in terms of the historical emergence of new kinds of desires. This is how the photography theorist Geoffrey Batchen has explained the emergence of photography. What made it possible for photography to be invented simultaneously by several people in and around 1839 was not the development of new technologies (all of the technological and chemical processes involved in early photography had been known separately for some time) nor the effort to produce an objective representation of reality, but the desire to record an immediate, momentary and subjective experience of nature, and to develop a means of representation "that draws nature while allowing it to draw itself".^{16/} Similarly, taxidermy and the diorama were products of the desire to fix an image and at the same time convey nature's transience. Through photography and film, people like Akeley could preserve a moment, and through taxidermy, wax and paint, reconstruct it in perfect simulation.

Dioramas invite desirous looking. This is not innocuous: in Britain dioramas with taxidermy were shown in popular displays intended to arouse the desire for colonial adventure and develop an enthusiasm for Empire amongst the working classes. In the first dioramas such as those in William Bullock's London Museum which opened in 1812, animals were displayed as trophies. The combination of the backdrop depicting the beasts' wild habitat and the dramatic if



unnaturalistic poses evoked an exaggerated ferocity and enabled them to fit public perceptions of wild and exotic beasts.¹⁷ The irony of taxidermy as trophy is that wildness and ferocity are exaggerated in the same move which domesticates the animal as an ornament. The oddness of taxidermy as trophy is made evident in one of Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson's photographs. This photo shows a polar bear rearing up, roaring, but against wood panelling and marbled veneer, and surrounded by expensive ornaments. The whiteness of the china and marble ornaments brings out the yellow in the bearskin, and their 'composedness' ridicules its exaggerated pose. The bear paws at an invisible cage, as if desperate to get out from behind that table and between those heavy wooden columns. And at the edge of the picture another paw suggests that the bear is one of a pair, an upper class version of the ornamental china spaniels on either side of a mantelpiece, another ornament. So the frozen moment, common to photography and taxidermy, is linked to the ornamental – and again both photography and taxidermy are often used ornamentally. In Frank Baum's *Wizard of Oz* stories, petrification is almost invariably associated with becoming ornamental, and a worse fate cannot be imagined. In those stories, which date from the 1900s and 1910s, characters are sometimes magically transformed into ornaments. In Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson's photograph the polar bear appears as if it were caught mid growl, rearing up, when the enchantment struck. It remains somehow out of place – too extravagant to really be an ornament. In the past, photographers have used taxidermy as a substitute for live animals. For instance, in the mid-twentieth century, popular encyclopaedias and natural history books were illustrated by photographs of the dioramas, rather than of living animals in their habitats, though this was not made explicit in the accompanying text. Early in his career, Eadweard Muybridge photographed taxidermy animals in parkland settings (later he became a pioneer of fast shutter speed photography of animal locomotion). Such photographs rely on the naturalistic setting to make the taxidermy seem convincing. In an ornamental setting, the bear cannot be real. In Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson's photograph the seam running down the bear's throat and belly is clearly visible.

Yet as Barthes noted, one of the peculiarities of photography is its indifference to distinctions between the living and the dead. It sometimes takes a while, looking at Victorian and Edwardian post-mortem photographs, to recognise that the people depicted there are corpses. With photographs of taxidermy, there is an oscillation between reading the taxidermy as such, and reading it as the animal it represents. Photography can make it possible to imagine that the animal might have been moving before and after the snap of the shutter. Yet, by detaching the taxidermy from the context (museum, or stately home) in which we are accustomed to finding it, and by freezing it photographically, some photographs seem to expose it for the artefact it is. Although the taxidermist may have hoped that the bear might look as life-like as if it had been suddenly and magically frozen, the photograph can make it seem like a dead thing brought to life, as ungainly and crude as Frankenstein. In the *Oz* stories, as well as characters turned to ornaments, there are ornaments brought to life. These fragile and ungainly things serve as lessons in the dangers of careless magic, and they include a reluctantly revived taxidermied trophy head called the Gump and a bearskin rug, which walks about like a hollow, flattened bear.¹⁸ Similarly, in Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson's image, the pose of this polar bear, meant to indicate ferocity, may be read, as an unconvincing puppet-like movement, a pretend polar bear doing a very poor impression of a real polar bear.

One of the consequences of the indexicality of both taxidermy and photography is that the particular has to be made general; a specific scene, moment or individual, made to stand for something larger than itself. This difficulty can be seen in the anthropomorphic taxidermy of Hermann Ploucquet, which was exhibited amongst the 'oddities' at the Crystal Palace exhibition in 1851. They were such a hit with the public that a book representing the pieces in engraved illustrations and entitled *The Comical Creatures of Wurtemberg* was subsequently published.¹⁹ A series of daguerreotypes of the tableaux also exist. The differences between the engravings and the photographic images are interesting. For example, Ploucquet created a series of tableaux illustrating the medieval French tales of Reynard

Right
Marble statue of the First Lord
Somersetleyton as a boy





the fox. The daguerreotypes of these show a series of scenes from the adventures of Reynard as a series of different, unfortunate, dead foxes (actually fox-cubs) in unnaturalistic and awkward poses. Neither taxidermy nor photography are quite able to do justice to the Reynard stories, in which Reynard is not simply a fox, but Fox himself. In animal fables, a whole species can be represented in the singular, just as in statuary, heraldry, and even language, a representation of one animal comes to represent the qualities attributed to the species as a whole – so that, for instance, the lion represents courage, the fox cunning. In photography, and taxidermy, the indexical relationship of the representation to a specific individual animal makes such symbolic generalisation harder to achieve. Of course, it still goes on: a starving child depicted in a photograph represents a whole famine, a polar bear represented through taxidermy may represent its entire species, or alternatively conquest, the North, the courage of the hunter. Both taxidermy and photography rely on the larger context (the newspaper, the museum display) to anchor their meaning and draw attention away from the specificity: that child, this bear. In the engravings though, there is no difficulty in making Reynard appear as one fox, moving through a series of scenes. Here, the transformation of the animals into universals is complete. The engravings bring the taxidermy to ‘life’, the animals are more light of foot, and (perhaps disturbingly) more virile and muscular than taxidermy could permit.

The engravings do not have the ‘truth claim’ of the daguerreotypes – if I want to know what Ploucquet’s taxidermy ‘really’ looked like, I would turn to the photographs rather than the engravings. Yet perhaps the engravings more accurately represent how the taxidermy looked to many of the Victorian spectators in 1851 – who can say? Today it may seem that the mismatch between the daguerreotypes and the engravings of Ploucquet’s foxes is too great, that it is not possible that these stiff little foxes could be read as the wily Reynard, with all the character and expression which the engravings suggest. But taxidermy is now much more contested and controversial. Some visitors to the Natural History Museum in London now complain about the presence of taxidermy. Most museums today no longer employ their own taxidermists, and in some places, find it difficult to maintain their existing examples because of a lack of museum standard taxidermists. There is a modern sensibility which views taxidermy as gruesome. We live in an age in which it seems increasingly odd, and even unbearable, where its content has become death. Today, a great many people who eat meat have never prepared a carcass to eat, have never even handled a dead animal before it was skinned. Western culture’s antipathy toward specific acts of violence against animals is not a sign of our rejection of the violent domination of nature but the product of a society in which that domination is achieved and in which we no longer live ‘amongst animals’. It could be argued that this makes us as anthropomorphic



Opposite
Hermann Ploucquet, *Reynard Attacked by Laprelle the Rabbit*, illustrations after a taxidermic tableau presented at the Great Exhibition of 1851, from *The Comical Creatures of Württemberg*, London: David Bogue

Above
The Story of Reynard the Fox Set Out in Two Cases



as Plouquet, to the extent that current aversion to taxidermy is to do with a wider cultural difficulty with death: for perhaps taxidermy's dependence on death recalls death in general, and by extension our own deaths.

Contemporary art which uses taxidermy often responds to this attitude. The view of the taxidermied animal as a dead thing contributes to the pathos and humour of Maurizio Cattelan's *Bidibodobidiboo*, 1996, in which a squirrel has apparently shot itself whilst sat at a miniature kitchen table, or of Annette Messager's *Les Repos des Pensionnaires*, 1971-1972, taxidermied sparrows for whom the artist has knitted small, sparrow shaped cardigans and blankets. Yet *nanog: flat-out and bluesome* works differently. Set up as a kind of research project, exhibited as work in progress, it investigates the provenance of the taxidermy specimens, reconnecting them to the hunt, that is, not to death in general, but the specific deaths of these polar bears. The polar bears assembled in the Spike Island exhibition space did not specifically invite an anthropomorphic reading. Their impact derived from their number and size – that many polar bears, and so big – and the whiteness of the entire installation. Their resonance is connected to the fact of their having been hunted, the scale on which they were accumulated. Cattelan's squirrel and Messager's sparrows are no longer specimens, but these are, though they now evidence not the species as such, but something else, our relationship to polar bears and to the North, perhaps.

Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson's photographs do allow an anthropomorphic reading, if only because photography implies that taxidermy could come to life, and from that it is not such a large step to see the bear cub like a child in a packing case, or to see the animal concealed beneath a cloth in one photograph, as playing a game. This comical creature is in the shadows, with only its muzzle and two feet peeking out. Perhaps it is an ass, though it looks too hairy, perhaps an ape, though it seems to have hooves. It looks in the same direction as the bear in the same image, whose face has a lively, quizzical expression. Since the photograph does not distinguish

between the living and the dead, and tends to imply a before and after, and since the taxidermied bear is posed to imply motion, it is possible to imagine the bear stepping forward, or the other animal emerging from beneath the cloth. The play of concealing/revealing which is part of the pleasure of going behind the scenes is dealt with in other photographs of taxidermy, for instance, those of Rosamond Wolff Purcell, which reveal the museum store as a treasure trove of the bizarre and beautiful. In *nanog: flat-out and bluesome* it is not just the neglected bears which are revealed from behind the scenes, but also the culture which oversaw their transformation from living animals into specimens and trophies.

Above left
Maurizio Cattelan, *Bidibodobidiboo*, 1996, taxidermied squirrel

Above right
Annette Messager, *La repos des pensionnaires*, 1971-1972, detail, wool, feathers, 154 x 94 cm

Opposite
Rosamond W Purcell, Reconstruction of *Ole Worm's Museum*, 2004



^{1/} Marey, Etienne-Jules, cited in Braun, Marta, *Picturing time: the work of Etienne-Jules Marey (1830-1904)*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992, p. 57.

^{2/} Braun, *Picturing time: the work of Etienne-Jules Marey (1830-1904)*, pp. 37-38.

^{3/} Flaherty, Robert J, "How I filmed *Nanook of the North*: Adventures with the Eskimos to Get Pictures of their Home Life and Their Battles with Nature to Get Food. The Walrus Fight" in *Worlds Work*, October 1922, pp. 632-640.

^{4/} Silver, Alain, "Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North*", in *One World Magazine* <http://www.oneworldmagazine.org/seek/nanook/nanostry.htm>, accessed July 2005.

^{5/} Flaherty, Robert J, "How I filmed *Nanook of the North*".

^{6/} Sontag, Susan, *On Photography*. London: Penguin Books, 1977, p. 15.

^{7/} Barthes, Roland, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, Richard Howard trans., New York: Hill and Wang, 1981, p. 14.

^{8/} Olalquiaga, Celeste, *The Artificial Kingdom: A Treasury of the Kitsch Experience*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1998, p. 40.

^{9/} Ewen, Stuart, *All-Consuming Images: The Politics of Style in Contemporary Culture*, New York: Basic Books, 1988, pp. 24-26.

^{10/} Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, pp. 5-6.

^{11/} Sontag, *On Photography*, pp. 14-15.

^{12/} Metonyms are a type of metaphor in which something stands for a greater thing to which it is linked. Synecdoche is similar, except that the thing stands for something that it is actually a part of. So, the white surroundings are metonyms for the arctic (connected by their whiteness) while the bears are synecdoche.

^{13/} Berger, John, "Why Look at Animals?" (1977), in *About Looking*, New York: Vintage, 1991, p. 3.

^{14/} Maleuvre, Didier, *Museum Memories: History, Technology, Art*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999, pp. 214-215.

^{15/} Berger, "Why Look At Animals?", p. 16.

^{16/} Batchen, Geoffrey, *Each Wild Idea: Writing, Photography, History*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000, pp. 22-23.

^{17/} Yanni, Carla, *Nature's Museums: Victorian Science and the Architecture of Display*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999, p. 150; Ritvo, Harriet, *The Animal Estate: the English and other Creatures in the Victorian Age*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987, pp. 248-254

^{18/} Baum, L. Frank, *The Marvellous Land of Oz* (1904), Dover Publications: 1997; Baum, L. Frank, *The Road to Oz* (1909), Dover Publications: 1986.

^{19/} Resleure, Tia, <http://www.acaseofcuriosities.com>, accessed August 2005.