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Research Paper

Julia Pastrana, the “extraordinary lady”

Julia Pastrana, la « dame extraordinaire »

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ABSTRACT

Julia Pastrana was a Mexican woman whose “extraordinary” appearance led to her being displayed throughout Europe and America, first as a freak, then as a specimen. Recently, she was reburied in her birthplace. This essay considers the ways that Pastrana’s display both reinforces and challenges the lines between the self and other, human and non-human, ordinary and extraordinary that such spectacles rely upon. It further suggests how discursive systems, such as race, gender, normativity, and humanness intertwine in the social practices that constitute them. By analyzing how Pastrana’s display and recent repatriation and burial in Sinaloa invest her body with different meanings, this essay traces more complexly the processes that socially mark human bodies in order to reveal and explicate the inner workings of representational systems, such as race, gender, ethnicity, and disability.

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RÉSUMÉ

Julia Pastrana était une Mexicaine dont la physionomie « extraordinaire » a fait qu'elle a été exhibée à travers l'Europe et l'Amérique, d'abord comme un monstre, et après son décès, comme un spécimen. Ce n'est que récemment qu'elle a été rapatriée et enterrée dans son pays d'origine à Sinaloa. Cet essai examine comment l'exhibition de Pastrana, simultanément, renforce et conteste les frontières entre le Moi et l'Autre, entre l'humain et le non-humain,

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entre l'ordinaire et l'extraordinaire – frontières sur lesquelles le spectacle lui-même reposait. Par ailleurs, ce texte examine comment des systèmes discursifs autour des notions de « race », de « genre », de « normativité » et « d'humanité » s'entrelacent dans les pratiques sociales qui les constituent. Nous analyserons comment l'exhibition, le rapatriement et l'enterrement de Pastrana réinvestissent son corps avec des significations différentes, et ceci nous permet de tracer plus subtilement les processus qui marquent le corps humain socialement, et aussi d'expliquer les fonctionnements internes des systèmes de représentation sur la race, le genre, l'ethnicité, et le handicap.

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1. History of Julia Pastrana

On December 1, 1854, Julia Pastrana, a hirsute Mexican-Indian woman, was exhibited in New York's Gothic Hall on Broadway where she was billed as a "Marvelous Hybrid or Bear Woman". The theater chronicler, George C. D. Odell, found the display of this "semi-human being" a "delight", noting in his journal that she was "somewhat between a human being and an ourang-outang". Odell gave the following description of Pastrana, capturing the essence of most all explications of her extraordinary body: "The eyes of this *lusus natura* [sic] beam with intelligence, while its jaws, jagged fangs and ears are terrifically hideous. . . . Nearly its whole frame is coated with long glossy hair. Its voice is harmonious, for this semi-human being is perfectly docile, and speaks the Spanish language" (Odell, 1970: 413). Odell interprets Pastrana's body as a contradiction, a *lusus naturae* or joke of nature, designed by a fanciful and omnipotent God to delight and discomfort those who are unambiguously human by confounding their understanding of the natural world. Odell, like Pastrana's other spectators, viewed her as incongruity incarnate, as simultaneously "intelligen[t]" and "hideous", as "docil[ly]" speaking Spanish through "jagged fangs". She seemed, in short, at once recognizably human and utterly alien.

Pastrana's numerous stage sobriquets in her wide exhibition in both the US and abroad suggests the discordant readings her body prompts. She was billed variously as a "Nondescript", "Misnomer", "Bear Woman", "Baboon Lady", "Ape Woman", "Hybrid Indian", "Extraordinary Lady", and "The Ugliest Woman in the World". Naturalists, scientists, aristocrats, stage fans, and ordinary people flocked to see her and paid to make her famous. But what emerges most clearly from even a brief review of Pastrana's history is what a compelling interpretive occasion her body provided her enthralled fellow human beings. The facts of Pastrana's short life are few, while the narratives of her exceptionality are sundry and highly elaborated. She appears to have been born in 1834 and belonged to a so-called Root-Digger Indian tribe in the Sierra Madre Mountain region of Mexico. Her entire body was covered with thick black hair and her dentition was unusually prominent. As a young woman, she apparently left the mountains to serve in the household of the governor of the state of Sinaloa, perhaps as a curiosity. Like many people whose bodies were atypical, she was recruited by one of the eager entrepreneurs who trafficked in unusual bodies for the burgeoning market in what the nineteenth century called "freaks".

By 1854, Pastrana's body had been appropriated as a profit-making exhibition and was being proclaimed as one of the greatest marvels of the stage. She went on tour in New York, Boston, and Baltimore and made her debut in London in July, 1857, as "the Wonder of the World". Like almost all people whose bodies were commodified for these exhibitions, Pastrana was overseen by a manager who closely regulated her social interactions, controlled the considerable profits she generated, and apparently married her as well. Her manager/husband, Theodore Lent, displayed her throughout Europe in performances where she sang, danced, submitted to examinations, and appeared at staged social functions.

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