



Nadja Durbach. *Spectacle of Deformity: Freak Shows and Modern British Culture.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009. xiii + 273 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-25768-9.

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Representing “Freaks”

Interpreting people who were presented at freak shows during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as disabled has become a standard part of the disability studies canon, most notably influenced by the work of Robert Bogdan and Rosemarie Garland Thomson.[1] In her book on freak shows in Britain during their heyday from the mid-nineteenth century to World War One (1847-1914), Nadja Durbach seeks to challenge this interpretation as historically inaccurate, based on late twentieth- and early twenty-first century ideas that are lacking in historical context.

Durbach notes that Victorian and Edwardian interpretations of “anomalous bodies” (p. 3) were unstable, in which contempt mixed with the comical to prevent any one perspective obtaining domination. She links these developments with the growth of more publicly accessible forms of entertainment for the masses, who had increasing time for leisure. While not new, these shows were more widespread than before and ranged from well-known venues to less established locales. Essential to the success of freak shows amongst people of all backgrounds was how they were presented as both fun and informative. This allowed people to claim they were engaging in relaxing leisure or earnest education when what they were doing more than anything else was going out and gawking at people who were in some way different from themselves.

An essential point of this book is to challenge the

impression that people who were employed as freaks were routinely exploited by cruel show promoters. Instead, people involved in freak shows were often themselves willing participants in ways that gave them relative independence and a good income in a culture in which they could seldom obtain these either outside the freak show, though Durbach also cautions against romanticizing this venture. A crucial missing piece of this history is the perspectives of people portrayed as freaks, as Durbach notes. Her comments on the need for historical context is directed in particular at disability studies scholars whom, she argues, inaccurately claim that freak show participants were disabled and were used by unscrupulous exhibitors. Durbach argues that it is historically inaccurate to join together “freakery” and disability. Instead, what is today called disability was not generally identified as such until after World War One, and then only to refer to veterans disabled in combat, and much later in the century applied more broadly. Thus, she argues, historical freaks were not disabled, given that this conceptual term did not become commonly ascribed to people now categorized in this way until long after freak shows experienced their height of popularity. Moreover, Durbach writes, using “disabled” is not a particularly useful term for freak show performers as it masks more than it reveals and subsequently closes down historical analysis of the meanings invested in the display of human anomalies. To speak of freak show performers as “disabled” thus works against the purpose of

the field of disability studies, which seeks to reveal the ways in which perceptions of bodily difference are culturally conditionedâ (pp. 17-18). Central to this analysis is how nineteenth-century poor laws were understood to distinguish between people who were able to engage in paid work and those who were not able to do so and were regarded as âinfirm.â According to Durbach, this implied that people employed as freaks were regarded as able-bodied and not as disabled in the way we have come to understand disability in recent decades. Yet, the fact that there exist no reliable first-person accounts of most people labeled âfreaks,â as Durbach states in her book, also means that the reliability of her analysis of them as able-bodied is questionable as we do not know what they thought of their bodily status themselves. As well, given the enormous amount of unpaid work asylum inmates did, the dividing line between able-bodied and infirm people is not as clear as is indicated in this study.

On firmer ground is the authorâs analysis, based on extensive primary source research, that the nineteenth century is significant, not due to the medicalization of bodily difference, but rather due to the manner in which scientific ideas were debated by medical elites and the wider mass of people. Durbach contributes an insightful analysis of how interpretations of the body were not promulgated by physicians without critical differences being expressed by lay people, something that researchers on this topic will need to take into account to question hegemonic interpretations of medical views during this time period. While doctors went to freak shows for their own careerist motives and âreportedâ on bodily differences to their colleagues, this did not mean that the lay public blithely went along with whatever physicians wrote. People attended freak shows for their own entertainment or âeducation,â and purveyors of these shows themselves countered notions of their human exhibits being pathological specimens, as this would have undermined a showâs respectability among a wider public which operators had no desire to do for obvious financial reasons. Notions about race and the body at a time when the British Empire was at its zenith were linked to portray the white body as the standard accepted body in contrast to the physically âdeformedâ body and bodies of different color. Durbach provides extensive elaboration of each of these areas throughout her book.

In chapter 1, Durbach provides a succinct analysis of the career of Joseph Merrick, better known as the âElephant Man.â Building on previous work, she shows how Merrickâs life as a public exhibit in freak shows, and

later his continuing exhibition by Dr. Frederick Treves among a select group of upper-class voyeurs, was far different from that depicted in the 1980 film made by David Lynch, who relied on Trevesâs self-serving account of the ânobleâ doctor saving a man exploited by greedy (and lower-class) showmen. Far from this simplistic movie portrayal, the good doctor comes across as anything but noble and Merrick as anything but the victim of scheming freak show operators. Instead, by including generally ignored primary sources, including the questionable account of showman Tom Norman, Durbach shows Merrick as having had a degree of autonomy and self-sufficiency through his work as an exhibit. This was a crucial self-perception in Victorian Britain for working-class men like him who regarded themselves as able-bodied based on their ability to earn a living.

When he became a hospital âpatientâ in 1886 under Dr. Treves for the last four years of his life, Merrick lost control over his body to his medical âbenefactor,â who restricted access to him and who continued to display him in what can only be described as medical freak shows. Far from the noble character portrayed in Lynchâs film, Treves used Merrick for careerist, not humanitarian, motives. That this was done at Merrickâs expense is made clear because his death in 1890 may have been suicide after four years of this restricted life in which his privacy was repeatedly violated for another form of exhibition over which he had no control, unlike in freak show exhibits. By placing Merrickâs career in the context of working-class notions of masculinity in mid-to-late nineteenth-century Britain and emphasizing how freak show exhibitors chose not to pathologize bodily difference—for self-interested financial reasons—Durbach revises this history from a tale of middle-class morality which viewed the Elephant Man as a victim more than anything else, to a story in which his economic agency is an essential part of understanding who Joseph Merrick was and what happened to him after this agency was lost.

âLalloo the Double-Bodied Hindoo Boy,â who began to be exhibited in Britain in 1886, is the focus of chapter 2. Originally displayed as an âexoticâ Indian, the main focus came to be the arms, legs, and torso protruding from his chest so that his body came to be regarded as âSiamese twinsâ Lalloo and his âsisterâ Lala. As people wanted to see what was billed as two conjoined people, this human exhibition was touted even more sensationally as being siblings of the opposite sex. Their conjoined status challenged notions of both individualism and gender, particularly as Lalaâs sexual ambiguity ignited much public and medical curiosity—or voyeurism. Doctors eventually de-

cided she was a she, thus calming offended sensibilities, though Lalloo and Lala continued to be marketed to the wider public as brother and sister until his death in 1905. Durbach argues that the anxiety over the sexual identity of the body attached to Lalloo reflected increasing British attention to Indian sexuality as supposedly producing aberrant offspring. It also took place during debates around incest and child sexual abuse, beside which Lala's small size and vulnerable positioning led to much prurient gazing from lay public and physicians alike.

Prurient inquisitiveness about physically different people also influenced the career of Krao, the Missing Link, the focus of chapter 3, who was displayed from 1883 when she was seven until her death in 1926. Originally from Southeast Asia, Krao was displayed at a time of widespread academic and public interest in Darwinian evolutionary theory and the purported missing link between humans and apes. Her unusually hairy body and Asian heritage combined to make her a distinctive stereotype for a white British public eager to have their curiosity sated by such educational exhibits. She was not touted as a freak but as a unique scientific specimen who was also looked upon as primitive for both her cultural heritage and the sexuality embodied in her physical appearance—large amounts of female hair symbolizing unbridled lust. Britain's imperialistic ventures in and around Southeast Asia—Burma in particular—and Krao's capture and display in the United Kingdom reassured the public of their civilizing venture, as soon as she was domesticated into a polite English girl (pp. 100, 102).

The racist and imperialist assumptions which were central to the exhibition of Krao were ever-present in the display of Aztecs and Earthmen—Mexican brother Maximo and sister Bartola as well as southern African San people, described in chapter 4. From the mid-nineteenth century into the early 1890s, they were displayed in Britain as the last vestiges of extinct or nearly extinct people whose supposed decline and primitiveness was taken as an abject lesson to white Britons of racial degeneracy and the need to protect their racial stock. Part of this degeneracy was linked to mental difference, with the Aztecs being compared to idiots (p. 137) or cretins (p. 140) after they were identified in the 1860s as belonging to a mixed race and therefore not Aztecs after all. The focus thereafter shifted to their existence being used as a warning that miscegenation would lead to British national decline.

This theme of English superiority amidst imperi-

alist anxiety continues in chapter 5 where the hiring of Irish working-class men and African Americans to portray indigenous Africans as savages is discussed in the context of the participation of phony freak show participants. Durbach argues: It was not the specific authenticity of the exhibition that was important but rather the security of one's own relationship to the performance (p. 150). Thus, the whether freak exhibits were real paled in comparison to the extent to which they confirmed the pre-existing prejudices of people who paid to see them. Yet, this did not mean the public were completely gullible—in one instance a group of sailors denounced fake Zulus based on their familiarity with Zulus after returning from southern Africa. That Irish workers were often hired as phony freaks, Durbach argues, reflects their extremely low status among the rest of British society. Domestic class prejudices thus reflected, and were closely aligned with, race prejudices towards people from overseas in which the cannibal king could be an Irish African (p. 158). That both Zulus and Irish fought British imperialism was a factor in their demonization as dangerous, irresponsible, and freakish inferiors who required control by colonial overseers.

Durbach concludes her study by briefly describing the decline of freak shows in Britain, which began around World War One with the return of disabled veterans and led to changed attitudes towards public displays of people with physical differences. The disappearance of freak shows in the United Kingdom is also linked to the spread of movies as an alternative form of entertainment; the influence of the beauty business; the pathologizing of bodily difference; and the impact of the disability rights movement. Surprisingly, in a book of otherwise rigorous scholarship and careful research, Durbach does not provide documentary evidence from Britain for her claim that these [disability rights movement] activists redefined the disabled to include not only those injured in service to the state but all members of society born with or who acquired bodily anomalies that compromised their ability to function within the dominant social context and built environment (p. 182). Yet, during the decade before the disability rights movement in Britain began organizing, Dr. Ludwig Guttman, of Stoke Mandeville National Spinal Injuries Centre, was writing in 1967 that people with spinal cord injuries experienced profound disability.^[2] As Guttman was referring to the general populace of people with spinal cord injuries, and as he was no disability rights activist, it is clear from just this one quote that the use of the term disability to define a much broader group of people—which Durbach ascribes

to the influence of disability activists—was taking place in British society well before the disability rights movement.

This leads back to her claim early in her book that people in freak shows who had physically “anomalous” bodies were not disabled since such a concept did not exist before World War One—and that for some time after, this term only applied to veterans. Her argument for the need among scholars in the field of disability studies to be more attentive to the historical context of “bodily difference as the product of a particular historical moment” (p. 16) is a welcome criticism that can only improve the study of disability in the past and present. At the same time, even if “disability” came to be more widely used during the second half of the twentieth century to describe an entire range of physical, mental, sensory, and cognitive differences, this should not therefore disqualify application of this concept to earlier periods and people, so long as it is done with caution to avoid presentism. Otherwise, the same argument would have to apply to numerous fields of study in which terms used in recent times are applied to eras before such semantic changes took hold—for example the history of First Nations peo-

ple in Canada, previously called “Indians.” Such terms are of course open to debate and redefinition, as is “disability.” While her book does not make a convincing case for avoiding the use of this term as a category to describe and interpret a broad group of people prior to the mid-twentieth century, Durbach is justified in calling on disability studies scholars to be much more careful to place into historical context the lives and experiences of people we now define as disabled, many of whom (even though she would disagree) were previously labeled “freaks.”

Notes

[1]. Robert Bogdan, *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); Rosemarie Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), and Rosemarie Garland Thomson, ed. *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (New York: New York University Press, 1996).

[2]. Anne Borsay, *Disability and Social Policy in Britain since 1750* (Houndmills: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 60.

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