

**An Encore of the Greatest Show on Earth: Victorian Marvels and Monsters Revamped for the Postmillennial Times**

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**Davies, Helen. *Neo-Victorian Freakery: The Cultural Afterlife of the Victorian Freak Show*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. 239 pages. ISBN 978-1-137-40255-4. Hb. \$90.**

The Victorian freak show, where “human oddities,” like the Bearded Lady, the Hottentot Venus, the Elephant Man, the Siamese twins, or the dwarf General Tom Thumb and his wee little wife, Lavinia, exhibited their monstrous, miraculous bodily anomalies “for amusement and profit”—as Robert Bogdan suggestively formulated in the title of his 1988 book—stunned their nineteenth-century contemporaries by simultaneously staging the freaks’ radical deviation from and similarity to the socially normativized, standard embodiment of their audiences. Their feat resided in the fact that their spectacular anatomical alterities did not prevent them from engaging in the same mundane activities as their spectators. The Armless Wonder having a cup of five-o’clock tea while holding the china cup with her toes provoked an ambiguous combination of fascination and anxiety, by confronting onlookers with the otherness lurking in the self-same, teasing and threatening with the return of the repressed, abject layers of subjectivity. As Elizabeth Grosz puts it, “the freak illustrates our fascination with our mirror-images,” the horror resulting from the recognition that this monstrous being is at the heart of our identity as a “constitutive outside” that must be ejected from the self-image “to make the bounded, category-obeying self possible” (65).

Postmillennial spectators’ affective attitude towards this historical tradition is even more complicated, given that the “othering” objectification of human exhibits distinguished by their physical, physiological difference holds ominous implications in the aftermath of collective human traumas, such as the Holocaust’s Nazi eugenics program, or recent terrorist attacks based on racial marginalization. Since popular culture’s visual regime is increasingly controlled today by legal and moral codes of political correctness, the revisiting of the Victorian freak show may equally induce guilty pleasures of taboo-breaking, an ethically dubious voyeurism, but can also function as a political gesture of disability rights activism aiming to challenge the normative bodily ideals dictated by the beauty myth maintained by our lookist, ableist, sexist consumer societies of the spectacle.

Still, the enduring appeal of the Victorian freak show is indubitable, and can be illustrated by a variety of examples of vehement audience reactions

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to neo-Victorian popular cultural products deemed controversial because of the thematization of freakery. Tod Browning's by now classic *Freaks* (1932), a revenge thriller "disability drama" about the dark underbelly of carnival life, social marginalization, and the contrasting of external versus internal monstrosity shocked audiences so much that they wanted to lynch the director. MGM eventually withdrew the—already heavily cut—film from circulation after just three weeks, simply because it featured actual freak show performers with genuine unconventional embodiments, whose sight, critics opined, belonged "more to medical centers" than cinema halls (Smith). While the horror anthology television series, *American Horror Story* devoted a whole 2014 season to the theme of the freak show to maximize the delights of safe fears resulting from the body horror genre, the recent 2017 musical romance drama, *The Greatest Showman* celebrated in a light-hearted and most likely historically inaccurate biopic the visionary entrepreneur circus impresario, P. T. Barnum for making the side-show business a worldwide sensation. The conflicting audience responses, ranging from outrage to pleasurable dread, and feel-good escapism, as well as the controversy surrounding *The Greatest Showman's* celebrating tolerance by whitewashing the man who possibly exploited his irregular protégés neatly demonstrate that there are plenty of dilemmas to be discussed and further research to be done in this field.

Helen Davies, Senior Lecturer in English studies at Teesside University, UK, is a perfect candidate to embark on the challenging enterprise to decipher what the exhibition of people with extraordinary bodies in the nineteenth century can tell us about our own twenty-first century attitude towards physical difference. Her previous book, *Gender and Ventriloquism in Victorian and Neo-Victorian Fiction: Passionate Puppets*, published with Palgrave in 2012, offered a new insight into the concept of ventriloquism as a textual and metatextual theme in literature, while scrutinizing the sexual politics of dialogues between the nineteenth century and contemporary neo-Victorian fiction that keeps "talking back" to the previous era. In her new book on the cultural afterlife of Victorian freak shows, Davies traces a similar historical parallel with the goal to explore if today's cultural representations still perpetuate or, rather, challenge the horror and fascination, the patterns of exclusion, and/or fetishization the Victorians associated with freaks.

By entering into a critical dialogue with neo-Victorian and freakery studies, Davies considers neo-Victorianism as a self-conscious genre, grounded in "(re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 4) concerning the Victorian past that functions as a distorted funhouse mirror "disclosing something akin to rejected atavistic or archetypal selves" (Kohlke and Gutleben 5), irrevocably different yet disturbingly

familiar. Her main point is that neo-Victorianism embarks on a critical engagement with the aesthetic form and ideological messages of nineteenth-century literature, with the aim to “reimagine subjects who historically have been marginalized” by the culture of the era (4). Hence, the actual stake of her highly entertaining case studies resides in the politics of remembrance through the fictional re-enactments of cultural traumas, and the recognition of “disability as the most human experience” (Garland-Thomson 17).

The book explores the poetics and politics of representation of Victorian freak shows in contemporary literature and culture in five chapters, each devoted to an individual freak show celebrity, complemented with an afterword on the most famous showman, Barnum. The selected case studies illustrate the complex geographical and temporal reach of neo-Victorianism. A prominent example of how the preoccupation with freakery defies historical and spatial boundaries is the case of Sarah Baartman, a Khoikhoi woman from South Africa, born in the late eighteenth century, who was exhibited as the Hottentot Venus at London’s Piccadilly Circus, toured Europe and, after her premature death in Paris in 1815, had her brain, skeleton, and sexual organ displayed in the French capital’s Museum of Man up until 1972—her remains were not repatriated until 2002. Davies believes that the fascination with Baartman can be regarded as paradigmatic not only in so far as it illustrated the transnational scope of the freak show phenomenon, but also because it exercised a considerable influence on how the succeeding era’s discourses about differently-embodied performers have been permeated by colonial legacies which simultaneously eroticized and pathologized the exotic other—a tendency that problematically prevails in postmillennial societies’ “new orientalism” embedded in Western multiculturalism.

Chapter 1 examines how Suzan Lori Parks’s play, *Venus* (1990), and Barbara Chase Riboud’s novel, *Hottentot Venus* (2003) disclose the sexual, colonial, and medical discourses which have shaped Baartman’s persona throughout her lifetime, and asks if today’s readers can avoid becoming consumers of her afterlife and reject complicity in her objectification. Chapter 2 focuses on “Siamese twins” Chang and Eng Bunker, highlighting how speculations about conjoined sexuality and conjoined mortality have constituted formative discourses of the brothers’ (neo-)Victorian representations; while on the postmillennial plane, Darin Strauss’s and Mark Slouka’s fictional autobiographical novels “offer metatextual insights into the potential of forming connections between self and other,” factuality and fantastification (20). Chapter 3 scrutinizes giantess Anna Swan’s true life story pamphlet as a narrative form that provided her the adequate means to take control of her body and her destiny via a feminist counter-spectacular

empowerment—a feat that has been turned into a leitmotif in contemporary texts, like Susan Swan’s *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World* (1983). Chapter 4 explores how Victorian cultural constructions of childhood intersect with nineteenth-century discourses of dwarfism, with the aim to reveal how Victorian readings of “little people” as liminal trickster figures defined by their precocious sexuality have been problematized by contemporary novels—Jane Sullivan’s *Little People* and Melanie Benjamin’s *The Autobiography of Mrs. Tom Thumb*, both published in 2011—which lay more emphasis on the traumatic abuse of freak celebrities “belittled” by show business. Chapter 5 offers a double case study of two Victorian mythical monsters: Joseph Merrick, the Elephant Man, and the serial killer Jack the Ripper, both associated with deviancy, deformity, and sexual victimization. This chapter lends the analyses a transmedia scope: stretching beyond the confines of literary interpretations, it studies the blurring of physical distortion and moral monstrosity on a variety of media platforms, including a BBC TV series, a feature film, a stage play, and a graphic novel. The Afterword offers a typology of neo-Victorian fictional enfreakments of Barnum, considering his exotic fashioning, his aggrandized construction, and the imagining of his sexual failure in Stacy Carlson’s, Benjamin’s, and Angela Carter’s novels respectively.

Davies draws a colorful panorama of Victorian and neo-Victorian freakery, driven by the ethical agenda to commemorate, with due respect, those extraordinarily embodied performers of the past who still exercise a lasting influence on our current notions and evaluations of physical difference. Davies’s analysis of her delicate subject matter is carefully nested in the politically correct, non-hegemonic discourse propagated by feminist, queer, postcolonial, or disability studies scholars. Therefore, I found it an immense pity and a bit of too extreme precaution that the author decided not to illustrate her book with photographic representations of the freak performers she writes about in her textual analyses for fear that these “spectacles of prurience may continue to resuscitate modes of objectification they set out to undermine” (Mitchell qtd. in 18). Visual historical documents could have enhanced Davies’s text in an exciting way, if only she had trusted her readers enough to believe that they could be witnesses instead of voyeurs. Although the cover-image portraying an able-bodied nuclear family posing on a theatre stage could be problematized along the same lines, one could just as well argue that the cover is meant to suggest the blurring of the dividing line between representation and reality, normality and abnormality, us and them.

### Note

The author wishes to acknowledge the funding provided by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness (Research Project “Bodies in Transit 2,” ref. FFI2017-84555-C2-1-P) and the European Regional Development Fund for the writing of this review.

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