VICTORIAN FREAKS
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The Social Context of Freakery in Britain

EDITED BY

Marlene Tromp

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This rich and compelling collection is exemplary of what academics do best. The cultural work of scholars is to create new knowledge in the form of an ongoing critical conversation that considers and reconsiders a subject in increasingly fresh and complex ways. During the ten years between the publication of *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, the collection I edited in 1996, and this 2008 publication of *Victorian Freaks*, edited by Marlene Tromp, the conversation about the display of human beings as curiosities for what Robert Bogdan has called “amusement and profit” has expanded and deepened.

In my view, the emergence of what has come to be called Freaks Studies, a subfield within American Studies and Cultural Studies, begins in 1978 with Leslie Fiedler’s counterculture manifesto, *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self*. While Fiedler’s study unearths the history of the freak figure in new ways, it is rooted in the archetypal criticism of the period and a 1970s sensibility that seeks to defend freaks against the establishment. Fiedler aligns the freak figure with the hippie figure, arguing that freaks ought to be valued and allowed to exist in the world because they teach “us” about “ourselves.” Ten years later in 1988, Robert Bogdan’s *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* brings a social constructivist reading to the freak figure that
focuses on the disparity between actual people who took on the role of freaks and the exaggerated performance of the displays. Bogdan’s materialist analysis brings forward for the first time the social category of disability to demonstrate that freak shows are part of the labor history of people with disabilities, often augmented with racialization and gender ambiguity. By moving the freak figure from mythology to materialism, Bogdan begins the critical project of humanizing freaks.

Almost ten years after Bogdan published *Freak Show*, my edited collection, *Freakery*, expanded his constructivist approach by bringing forward the issue of representation more fully, often through literary analysis and historiography. Following Bogdan, *Freakery* and the various book-length studies that began in that volume rigorously grounded their analysis in the social systems of disability, race, gender, class, and sexuality. After Bogdan, freaks were always people who performed roles as freaks. Several very strong cultural studies about freaks, largely by historians and literary critics, emerged from Bogdan’s tradition and *Freakery*. Rachel Adams, James W. Cook, Andrea Dennett, Alice Dreger, and Benjamin Reiss, among others, ranged across American freakery, dominated as it is by Barnum, the canny and outrageous entrepreneur who took us all to the cleaners with his humbugs, even as we delighted in the ride.4

My challenge in writing the foreword to *Freakery*—and in all the scholarly work I do on the representation of disability—is how to find precise language to talk about freaks and their display that unsettles the way we understand freaks as freakish, as on the far edge of human, as not “us.” In other words, how do we talk about freaks without reinscribing the oppressive attitudes we attempt to critique? The most effective way to do this is to keep a steady focus on the materiality of the people who performed as freaks and the particular circumstances of their actual lives. Bogdan’s sociological constructivist approach assures the freak’s humanity by focusing on the social relations of enfreakment.

*Victorian Freaks* advances this project of according full humanity to the people who performed as freaks by shifting from a social constructivist understanding of freakery to a rigorous materialist analysis. This fine collection ranges across a wide spectrum of what might be called freak instances in a particular historical time and place: Victorian Britain. By turning the focus of freaked studies from American matters to concerns that emerge in the British context—while acknowledging the global and transnational implications that remain in play, even when reading from that British context—the authors here look to the alternative
notions of the marketplace and economics in Britain, alongside the intellectual and social industry of medicine, the role of imperialism, and the peculiarly British set of social values presented in the period fiction. Thus, this collection when placed beside much of the other studies of freakery introduces a strong comparative aspect into our inquiry of these pervasive spectacles.

By materialist analysis, I mean not just economic relations of freakery but also how the material aspects of social categories such as race, gender, class, and—in particular—disability play out in the material world. This insistence on the specific materiality of freak performances refuses metaphor and insists on humanity. It expands from the material lives of freaks, their handlers, and their audiences to demonstrate how the shows were dramas that played out cultural anxieties in both the individual and national context. The virtue of this analysis is that the freaks cannot be relegated to metaphorical figures of otherness, but rather they are enfleshed as they are enfreaked, always particular people in particular lives at particular moments in particular places.

Victorian Freaks not only makes a splendid contribution to Freak Studies, Disability Studies, and Victorian Studies, it is one of the liveliest collections I have come across. It knows how to talk about freaks, to vivify and humanize the entire cast of characters involved in these marvelous and theatrical social rituals.

Notes

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“Freaks” have captivated our imagination since well before the Victorian period—we can trace records back to the public exhibition of freaks for centuries—but the nineteenth century was a time of significant social change, highly popular freak shows, and taxonomic frenzy; this nexus makes the period particularly rich for the study of the freak\textsuperscript{1} phenomena. Nearly every critic writing on freaks has echoed this sentiment, pointing to the Victorian era as central in the establishment of freak shows and in the evolving understanding of “freaks” as a social construct. Indeed, it was in 1847 that the term developed its contemporary association with human anomaly.\textsuperscript{2} This collection of essays considers the period Rosemarie Garland-Thomson has described as the epoch of “consolidation” for freakery.\textsuperscript{3} The authors here focus on this period, highlighting several important patterns. They examine the struggle over definitions of freakery, the unstable and sometimes conflicting ways in which freakery was understood and deployed. They explore the ways in which the multiple constructs of freakery threatened to undermine definitions of normalcy—a notion in relation to which freakery was structured.

Centrally, the essays in this collection seek to understand the effects of individual and ideological relationships to freakery and to situate
freaks in their Victorian cultural context. In this way, we hope to flesh out the impact of freakery on mainstream culture, as well as some of the cultural investments that produced freakery. While this book only begins this project, the scholarship presented here helps us better understand not only freakery but also the period. To open the conversation, we have three aims in the introduction: first, to locate freakery. We talk about how, in general, freakery comes to be defined by its historical period, which makes comprehending freakery’s context a vital process. We then ask broad-based questions about how it can be read in its social, political, and material context in the nineteenth century. Second, we dislocate freakery to examine the ways in which the malleability and fluidity of the concept amplified its importance in mainstream culture. Debates over the freak brought conversations about freakery into the mainstream in a way that again calls for attention to cultural and historical specificity. Finally, we look across the range of essays in the collection to identify how they will, with more specificity, identify some of the material effects of and relationships to freakery.

**Locating the Freak: Social Context**

Mary Russo has argued in her study of the “freak and the uncanny” that the “grotesque body is . . . irregular secreting, multiple, and changing,” yet it is also “identified with . . . social transformation.” While she acknowledges that the carnivalesque and freakish can have a “complicitous place in dominant culture,” she underscores the potential for social transformation from the locus of the freak, and indicates that, for this reason, studies of it have often been anthropological, culturally situated, and a source of information regarding social processes. To a Victorianist, assessing the complex role of freakery in the nineteenth century means situating these disruptive and multivalent constructs. In her study of female disability in the nineteenth-century novel, Cindy LaCom argues that we must read bodily difference in its historical context to understand better how identity in the period—for both the “normative” and the “non-normative”—was constructed. We can better comprehend constructions of femaleness, she argues, if we understand constructions of the woman as freak. It is not only scholars of freakery who have argued that context is crucial in terms of understanding social constructs and identity formation, but also theorists of culture and identity. Judith Butler laid much of the groundwork for such thinking when
she argued that gender, sexuality, and, more generally, the body itself are “produced effects of [laws] imposed by culture”—in other words, that these structures are generated by and generate social meaning.\textsuperscript{7} It follows, then, that we must understand the social context in which those “laws” are produced to evaluate this process and its outcomes.

Biologist Anne Fausto-Sterling concurs with Butler’s claims about the social process of identity formation in her study of sexual “anomalies.” She explains that the body is a “somatic fact created by cultural effect.”\textsuperscript{8} The body—whether normative or not—is structured by the cultural context. This does not mean that the “body” is simply discursive, that there is no body or potential bodily difference to comprehend or figure or that these constructs are not multiple and slippery. Rather, it suggests that the body and its characteristics only come to mean something within a particular social and conceptual system and that the body is, in fact, determined by context. Take, for example, a case tackled by both Butler and Fausto-Sterling—and one that can serve as a model for studying the social and bodily construct of freakery in the nineteenth century—that of biological sex.

Fausto-Sterling explains that those categories that seem so clear and foundational in contemporary culture are actually socially defined, and that we can see this evidenced in the response to intersexed or “hermaphroditic” bodies (bodies that blur the lines between the sexes by being neither “properly” male nor female). Intersexuals’ bodies are often surgically restructured in Western culture to preserve traditional notions of gender, but these restructurings are based on highly capricious and culturally specific notions of what “counts” as male or female genitalia (i.e., the size or length of the phallus) or what is valued in that particular society. For example, children who are born with congenital adrenal hyperplasia—chromosomally XX (“female”) babies who have “masculinized” genitalia (an apparent penis)—are almost always identified as boys at birth and then surgically altered to “look female” in the United States: the phallus is reduced, the tissue surrounding it cosmetically shaped, and the children raised as girls. In Saudi Arabia, however, where male births are highly valued, these children are often raised as male.\textsuperscript{9} On the other hand, children with XY (“male”) chromosomes who are androgen insensitive are born with “feminized” genitalia and are typically raised as female. In adulthood, with no intervention, they will be virtually indistinguishable from adult XX bodies, except for the lack of functional uterus and ovaries.\textsuperscript{10} In the nineteenth century, these individuals would have been read as unquestionably female, though
infertile. Today, a woman might unexpectedly discover this medical fact as an adult and have her whole life turned upside down, as Olympic athlete Maria Patiño did when she was barred from competing in 1988.

Both of these cases reveal the way in which social context drives our understanding of bodies and sex identity. By extension, we can see how this would relate to bodily definitions of normalcy and freakery. While we may have been trained to think of freakery as a self-evident physical anomaly with which someone is born, the essays here emphasize the ways in which freakishness is made, not just with biology, but with a social function in a social context. If people from different cultures and physical landscapes (e.g., Chinese or Africans) could be exhibited as freaks in the United States and Europe in the nineteenth century simply because they were culturally and socially different from Anglo-Americans and Anglo-Europeans, and if people with tattoos or very long hair or nails were (and remain) staples of freak shows, then we must recognize the way in which enfreakment is not just about nature’s work but rather is created by the body, plus its context, plus individual choices. Social context has as much weight as physical difference. Even those differences we recognize as most overtly bodily, such as hirsutism or, even more subtly, hair on a woman’s upper lip, are tolerated in various degrees depending upon the culture, and some clearly visible differences have almost no social valence at all—such as whether or not individuals have attached or detached earlobes—or very little social valence, such as extra toes or missing fingers. It is, in part, because we frame something as freakish that it becomes freakish to us, as Robert Bogdan has argued. For Bogdan, a freak is social construction, not a personal matter or condition of body—a “frame of mind and set of practices.” 11

This certainly does not mean we should elide the very real bodily differences that can affect individual lives. Disability and visible difference have often been central features in the construction of freakishness, and there is a politics to this phenomenon, 12 but we must ask in tandem what makes one difference freakish and not another in a particular cultural moment. To understand this process of enfreakment we must understand the social context in which it is defined. Moreover, most academics are scholars of particular periods and locations, and having “situated” information enriches our understanding of all other aspects of that physical and temporal landscape. Currently, however, the vast majority of the scholarship on freak shows and on the construction of freaks has been situated in the United States, in part because of colossal
figures such as P. T. Barnum, who has been read almost exclusively in his native American context. There has been no sustained exploration that historically and physically situates the phenomenon in nineteenth-century Britain or examines its impact on British Victorian consciousness. The work on U.S. culture has served as a model for the kind of scholarship contained in this collection, particularly as it points to the ways in which American culture shaped and was shaped by the structure and content of circuses, sideshows, and their performers. Chief among these works is Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Disability in American Culture and Literature* and her fine collection, *Freakery*, which spans history and genre to speak to largely American “cultural spectacles” shaped around the “extraordinary body.” Other important and pivotal studies are Leslie Fiedler’s *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self* and Robert Bogdan’s *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit*. Also significant are Rachel Adams’s *Sideshow U.S.A.: Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination*, James W. Cook’s *The Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum*, Benjamin Reiss’s *The Showman and the Slave: Race, Death, and Memory in Barnum’s America*, and Janet M. Davis’s *The Circus Age: Culture and Society Under the American Big Top*. This superb work on freakery has provided the springboard for this project, and the general precepts of these arguments are often enormously valuable.

These writers point to the ways in which the production of performers in a particular space and time emerges from and helps shape the circulating social concerns. For example, Barnum advertised performers whom he billed as former slaves, exhibitions that were marketed to appeal to American patriotism, to both exploit and speak to the ongoing anxieties about the history of slavery, and to participate in the production of a new sense of Americanness. As Benjamin Reiss has argued, studying the strategies of such exhibitions is like “tak[ing] a tour of [American] antebellum cultural history.” James W. Cook concurs, calling these exhibits “the birthday of modern American popular culture.” He traces its initial “quintessentially antebellum American[ness]” and its ultimate transformation into a Barnumesque game of questions of truth and performance, calling the latter a form of “artful deception” that he reads as a particularly American phenomenon. There is no equivalent study that focuses on Britain. Another fine study, John Kuo Wei Tchen’s *New York Before Chinatown*, examines the role of Orientalism in the creation of Americanness. His research considers the range of Asian exhibits, from Chang and Eng, the “Siamese Twins,” to those
who simply appeared on stage in Asian dress. He argues that responses to such performers were based on American ideological constructions of Orientalism—structures that reflected American values of race, difference, and national identity, not British notions of the same.

We must take up the lead offered by scholars like these and move toward situating freakery in the British context for Victorian studies scholars. In spite of the heavily American focus of most previous research, many of the people who figure our understanding of freakery appeared frequently in Victorian Britain, and the British were voracious consumers and producers of freakery. Joseph Merrick, the “Elephant Man,” was born in and spent most of his life in England; Charles Stratton, known as “General Tom Thumb,” was a favorite in the royal courts; Julia Pastrana, “The Nondescript,” inspired English poets and novelists; and Krao Farini, “The Missing Link,” appeared at the Westminster Aquarium in London. As Mathew Sweet has pointed out in one of the few studies that even speaks to England’s consumption of freakery, “In Britain, the exhibition of bizarre curiosities—some living, some dead, some animal, some human—was a thriving industry throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.”

Though this collection cannot offer an exhaustive or complete response to the critical questions about the place of the freak in Victorian Britain—indeed, as a body, these essays suggest that any notion of “containment” or “completeness” would ignore the multiplicity and fluidity that they also describe—it does offer a significant and engaging conversation about these issues. It attempts, for the first time, to throw the door open to questions about the context of British Victorian freakery, to take seriously Rachel Adams’s sense that imbricated in the freak shows were “ruptures in the anticipated order of things.” If we hope to gesture toward the ways in which these ruptures figured social structures and social power, and also may have participated in social evolution, we must place them in their context.

Of course, this does not mean that we should ignore the transnational pollination, and the essays here cross the borders of the time and space they intend to illuminate in order to flesh out the differences and similarities between the U.S. and British contexts in richer ways. There is real value in understanding cross-cultural dialogues and in drawing out these relationships, but the distinctions are relevant as well. Even a cursory look at the British handbills produced for performers evidences the way in which they often bore the mark of English concerns and anxieties. Perhaps performers and their managers may have even chosen
the itinerary for their tour because the identity they were continually constructing better suited the context of a particular set of cultural concerns. For example, an Irish or Indian performer had a different socio-political valence in England than he would in America, and notions of class were figured very differently in the United States than in Britain. The essays in this collection, however, will begin to develop a conversation around this field of concerns. While this project calls for more work on British freakery, work that can more clearly illuminate both differences and similarities and offer the kinds of comparative analyses that will enrich our understanding of both “normalcy” and “deviance” in a British context, these essays seek to locate—and, as we explain below, to dislocate—the Victorian freak.

**Dislocating the Freak: Social Ambiguity**

While we have argued that locating the freak is crucial, we must also attend to dislocation as well, exploring freakery’s fluidity, political ambiguity, and, in Rachel Adams’s term, “plasticity.” Freak exhibitions in the nineteenth century did not offer stable definitions of the freak. Instead, they employed hyperbole, misrepresentation, elaborate costuming and staging, and narrative modes from the fantastic to the sentimental. They paired farce with medical description and scientific theories. These strategies made the freak exhibition a mélange of ideas, of propositions; and these propositions invited a range of affective responses from curiosity and wonder to horror and disgust—but they always evoked conversation. Medical science may have attempted to minimize ambiguity and eliminate contradiction, but even scientific narratives were often in conflict, which generated more debate. Exhibited freaks and their managers often exploited the tensions in these conversations, generating multiple, even contradictory interpretations of bodily and social meaning for and with its audiences. As Rachel Adams has argued, both performers and audiences actively participated in generating meanings at freak shows—live events that privileged audience engagement. Audience and performers were engaging with one another in a climate that confused the boundaries between self and other, normal and pathological, authenticity and fraudulence.

Ambiguous bodies were not only commodified to produce a profit; they were a traffic in such ambiguous social meanings and controversy as well. Although promotional hype often proclaimed that the “original,”
“authentic,” “biggest,” or “smallest” was represented at the show, the goal of such advertising was not necessarily to persuade the public of the veracity of such claims but to provoke profitable conjecture. Freak shows attracted audiences by inviting the public to engage in epistemological speculation. Was the Feejee Mermaid a fake? Was the bearded lady really a man? Audiences paid for the opportunity to take a look and decide for themselves. Significantly, this interrogatory practice made freak shows volatile interpretive spaces that repeatedly called the boundary between the imaginary and the real into question, and by extension challenged the authority of discourses like medical science to name and explain the significance of the human body, as well as that of mainstream culture to determine all notions of normalcy. While profitable, such tension also begins to help us understand how such widespread cultural dialogue could produce cultural effects.

Much scholarly analysis of freak shows within the rubrics of cultural studies and disability studies proceeds from a commitment to contest discourses that naturalize race, gender, sexuality, and disability as categories describing bodily attributes rather than as structures that emerge from social relationships. They focus on rendering visible the effects of culture on freakery and of freakery on culture. Bogdan and Garland-Thomson agree that the freak show both authorized and delegitimated identities, but they part ways on who is enabled in the encounter between the freak and the observer. For Robert Bogdan, the present-day condemnation of freak shows reflects well-meaning but condescending assumptions about disability that were not shared by nineteenth-century performers and audiences. Bogdan argues that the majority of performers did not understand themselves to be exploited but preferred making a living with freak shows to the limited alternatives available to them in the mainstream.21 In a critique of Bogdan’s study, historian David Gerber argues that unequal social relations severely constrained the choices available to the people who became freak show performers and therefore compromised the “consent” Bogdan reads there.22 Garland-Thomson’s work looks to the ways in which the “othered” body serves as a marker for normalcy and absorbs anxieties embedded in the production of normalcy, notions that shift from culture to culture and over time.23 Each of them agrees, however, that the formation of freak identity was a process, and one that was complexly inflected by the culture in which the freak emerged.

Here, we emphasize, as many of the essays in this collection do, the ways in which freakery operates through partial, shifting identifi-
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cations—rather than stable oppositions and objectification—and that freaks were marked, figured, and refigured by the social and national context that both Bogdan and Garland-Thomson perceive as crucial. This is not to elide the exploitation of freak performers or the asymmetrical power relations between audiences and performers. It does, however, challenge us to imagine that, while freak shows did help to materialize the politically invested distinction between the normal and the pathological, the relationship between the terms was not always simple and was always heavily inflected by social engagement. Freaks provoked both identification and disavowal. The ambiguity, rhetorical excess, and ambivalence mobilized by the freak could work to oppose the standard for normalcy—to destabilize its naturalized status—as well as to produce and confirm it.

This “uneven” process, in Mary Poovey’s terms, made the meaning of exhibits (and the audiences that visited them) a question for speculation. Freak shows encouraged debate, which drew audiences and, in turn, became a part of a larger cultural dialogue. Whether or not it was always a conscious strategy—Barnum clearly chose it and excelled at it—the process engaged the public. The details of two of Barnum’s cases provide perhaps the most vivid example of the ways in which the freak was defined by and engaged in social debate and dialogue. When Madame Clofullia, a bearded woman, first exhibited herself in the 1850s, an “audience member” employed by Barnum objected that she was actually a man in women’s clothing and filed a lawsuit. Several doctors, her husband, and her father all verified that she was a woman, and the courts dismissed the suit. The media, of course, followed the entire affair with interest, arousing curiosity and attracting crowds. Likewise, when Barnum exhibited the Feejee Mermaid (a stuffed creature constructed from the body of a monkey sewn to the tail of a fish) in 1842, several naturalists publicly denounced the mermaid as impossible, and Barnum exploited this to his benefit. His advertisements maintained the uncertainty of the matter: “[It] is decidedly the most stupendous curiosity ever submitted to the public for inspection. If it is artificial the senses of sight and touch are ineffectual—if it is natural then all concur in declaring it the greatest Curiosity in the World.” Although the disagreement in this case was between scientific opinion and the claims of showmen, Barnum presented it to the public as a controversy among scientists and invited the general public to weigh in on the matter. “Who is to decide,” an advertisement asked, “when doctors disagree?” These tactics render visible the social engagement: the showman, the
performer, the journalist, the scientist, and the public all participate in the process. Clearly, this kind of richly inflected conversation can reveal Victorian ideological investments in a host of issues, including those beyond freakery itself.

For example, while the debates framing freak exhibitions and performances were driven by a desire for profit, rather than to challenge prevailing political structures, the social dialogue they produced often achieved both ends. These gestures tapped into the investments of audiences in ongoing social conflicts regarding “the Woman Question,” the emergent hegemony of the professional class, empire, and scientific advances. While the marketing strategies for an exhibit such as the Feejee Mermaid were a means of preempting charges of fraud and producing an audience, they appealed in part because they challenged the exclusiveness of scientific opinion and publicly extended a general invitation to participate in what was constructed as a scientific debate. Bearded ladies such as Madame Clofullia and the famous Julia Pastrana supplied a level of double entendre to women’s rights certainly not anticipated by nineteenth-century suffragists and their opponents. The claim that Clofullia was a fraud provoked speculation about her gender identity and, by implication, adamantly asserted two unambiguously distinct sexes, setting the stage for a spectacular announcement that she was indeed a woman with a full beard. This announcement unsettled prevailing assumptions about the distinctions between male and female bodies at a historical moment in which feminists and their opponents alike were invoking physiological explanations for sex difference to authorize their political claims.

Indeed, as Christopher Hals Gylseth and Lars O. Toverud suggest, the Victorians seemed to have been haunted by the figure of the bearded woman. These authors quote at length a poem by Arthur Munby called “Pastrana,” in which the narrator describes an encounter with the bearded lady. His account suggests a gendered slipperiness that undermines not only notions of femininity, but also—perhaps as a corollary—notions of masculinity as well:

Perhaps she would get at me, after all!
If the links should break, I might well feel small,
Young as I was, and strong and tall,
   And blest with a human shape,
To see myself foil’d in that lonely place
By a desperate brute with a monstrous face,
And hugg'd to death in the foul embrace
Of a loathly angry ape.\textsuperscript{29}

Though the narrator is young and strong and tall, the very epitome of masculinity, he is undone by the power of the bearded lady. In whatever way the culture attempts to manage and chain her into place, “the links [might] break,” and when she is set loose, the boundaries of gender determinacy are crossed. She threatens the narrator with an “embrace” so powerful that it would “foil” him, undo his masculine power, make him feel “small.” The imagined embrace, however, also implies the eroticized attraction of Pastrana and other bearded women.\textsuperscript{30} This complex series of tensions offered more than simply the shock value of this singular difference, as this poem suggests. They preoccupied the Victorian imagination because they suggested a kind of slipperiness of identity that threatened to undermine gender codes, a phenomenon that was occurring in a host of ways culturewide. Where a discomfiting cultural disruption was already taking place—every novel, book of manners, and household guide was engaged in the struggle to define gender—the bearded woman seemed to underscore a radical instability of the norm. The narrator of the poem has no power against her; she is only contained by the uncertain chains. Clearly, her size and strength are metaphors for the danger—as well as the attraction—of boundary transgression. They reveal the allure and drama of the freak that engaged the culture at large.

The social tensions described in these examples could not have existed in a vacuum. They exploited ideological tensions already in place, as well as public interest in social conflicts. Some exhibits encouraged skepticism toward experts (like the Feejee Mermaid), but others (like Julia Pastrana) utilized medical authority to assert their authenticity. Some performers were self-consciously complex in their presentation—and in a way challenged the overt characterization offered by the freak show. Historian David Gerber proposes and then repudiates the conclusion that the comedic self-parody of Charles Stratton’s performances as the famous, diminutive General Tom Thumb might be considered acts of defiance. However, it is precisely Stratton’s refusal to play his roles seriously and the self-referential dimension of this humor that foregrounded his performances as performances that would have worked to complicate the caricature of Tom Thumb, if not to create a palpable distinction between “Stratton the man doing the performance” and Tom Thumb. Like Stratton, other quite famous freak show
performers turned the hyperbole and contradictions of freak show hype to parodic effect. For instance, Krao Farini, a Laotian woman covered with hair, was exhibited as a missing link at the London Aquarium, and a photograph of her as a child pictures her dressed in animal skins against a jungle setting. As a young adult she continued to be billed as a missing link—who spoke five languages and dressed in fine clothing. The irony of Farini’s performances as an educated, well-dressed “missing link” with fine manners exposes the “missing link” narrative as a construction and insists on her humanity. At the very least, Farini called attention to her outrageous displays as performances rather than authentic representations. In doing so, she created a tension between her enfreakment and her humanity, and they exploited this tension as a source of entertainment. The practice of exhibiting people of color as “missing links” confirmed prevailing racial hierarchies that denied the humanity of nonwhite people, but these processes were never stable or complete. Farini’s complexly inflected performances as a “missing link” enacted a reversal that makes the definition of humanness a question rather than the self-evident, natural result of evolution. These tensions make evolution recognizable as a political discourse.

Nineteenth-century freaks and freak shows generated multiple, often contradictory interpretations because freak show practices for exciting public interest put interpretation of the explicitly contradictory evidence in the hands of the culture at large. Moreover, the performers themselves refused to fall into simple categorizations. The freak exhibition was as likely to reproduce the status quo as it was to produce politically subversive effects (or to do both at once). While there were many gestures that attempted to codify normality and its difference from those at the margins with reference to the freak, the slipperiness of freakery made this reference disruptive and created a threatening dislocation of terms. Not only did this process draw in audiences, but it also reveals a rich array of culturally situated tensions and invites us to explore them, to understand what they might have meant in Victorian Britain.

**Developing the Context, Examining the Effects**

The essays in this collection plumb the question of context in many different ways, and their concerns spring from those precipitated by much early work on freakery. Whereas other critics have discussed the ways in which definitions of normalcy were generated by marginalizing
various groups of people, these essays look to press this question further, opening an exploration of the ways in which freakery emerged in a particular social context and may have even participated in social change and in the politics of mainstream culture. As Rachel Adams has argued, the vast majority of criticism has assumed a kind of docile silence on the part of both the freaks themselves and their audience. This has even translated into a sensibility that imagines that freaks were distant from “ordinary” people and removed from everyday life. Adams resists the notion of freak show silence, however, arguing that “freaks talk back, the experts lose their authority, the audience refuses to take their seats.”

This collection looks for this dialogue in subtle and explicit ways. The essays on imperialism, for example, look to the way in which discourses of science—from Darwinian theory to medicine—were joined to freakery and deployed to do scientific work and work of empire. These essays also explore and speak to the tensions in British self-definition between consumer desire and material self-control. Others look at the relationship between the freak and the audience and the use of freakishness as a metaphor in other culturally marginal contexts. In all of these ways, these essays ask how freaks “talked back” to mainstream culture in Britain and how this helped shape mainstream culture. The authors here examine freaks’ pitch narratives, product advertisements, handbills, newspaper accounts, medical debates and texts, art, literature, cartes de visite, and diaries. Future research might explore the ways in which the British theater, museum, and publishing industries affected notions of freakishness and think about how British involvement in the West Indies and Africa also shaped cultural concepts of freakery.

Overall, the essays here attempt to centralize the question of cultural impact to move beyond individual psychology. When people watched Julia Pastrana—most of whose entire body was covered in coarse black hair—dance and sing on stage, they had more than simply an individual or personal experience. Those moments were also social events that affected life inside and outside the freak show. Poets, gentlemen, and prose writers such as Arthur Munby memorialized their experience of her for a Victorian audience. This cultural exchange was no less lively when her manager-husband had Pastrana and her infant embalmed, stuffed, encased in glass, and put on tour again after their birthing bed deaths. What this meant in Victorian Britain was something different from what it meant in America, or France, or any other part of the world.

The collection is structured to highlight and begin to flesh out
several of these themes. It opens with part I, “Marketing and Consuming Freakery,” in which the first essay, by Heather McHold, called “Even As You and I: Freak Shows and Lay Discourse on Spectacular Deformity,” examines the way in which the medical community competed with freak shows for the right to define freakery, suggesting that the latter succeeded by incorporating bourgeois normalcy into freak show rhetoric. Joyce Huff’s “Freaklore: The Dissemination, Fragmentation, and Reinvention of the Legend of Daniel Lambert, King of Fat Men” suggests that, though this seven-hundred-pound jailer died by the early nineteenth century, images of him proliferated decades later, and he became an icon in the shifting focus of economic theory from production to consumption and his eating a valorizing synecdoche for all consumer activity in Victorian England. Finally, Timothy Neil’s “White Wings and Six-Legged Muttons: The Freakish Animal” discusses the exhibited animal in the Victorian period, contending that the predominance of a human narrative context constructed all such animals as freaks and helped figure human freakishness as well. Together these essays look at the evolution and use of the discourse of freakery in Victorian Britain, examining its deployment in mainstream culture from medicine to consumerism, religion, and entertainment.

In part II, “Science, Medicine, and the Social,” Meegan Kennedy’s “‘Poor Hoo Loo’: Sentiment, Stoicism, and the Grotesque in British Imperial Medicine” explores the role of imperial and Orientalist ideologies in understanding and responding to the medical anomaly of Hoo Loo, an Asian man with an enormous tumor. Mapping the medical discourse of the day against racial rhetoric provides insight into another aspect of Orientalism. Christine C. Ferguson examines Dr. Frederick Treves’s famous case history of “Elephant Man” Joseph Merrick in the context of Victorian discourses of mutism and linguistic evolution. Ferguson argues that the narrative enacts a triumph of language in which the animality of the freak is (partially) abated through his cultivation of a voice and the linguistic skills—speaking, reading, and writing—foregrounded in Darwinian accounts of human identity. This section looks at how the medical and scientific worlds marked and were marked by freakery. By plumbing various concrete examples, it asks how freakery was a part of social institutions, such as medicine and science, that affected every Victorian’s life. Nadja Durbach’s “The Missing Link and the Hairy Belle: Krao and the Victorian Discourses of Evolution, Imperialism, and Primitive Sexuality” tackles the perceived evidence of Darwin’s theories in the body of Krao. Durbach’s careful examination reveals, however, that
much more than scientific discourse was embedded in the rhetoric of evolution and the exhibition of Krao. Both were intimately linked to imperialism and the sexuality of the colonized woman.

Durbach’s essay provides a fine transition to part III, “Empire, Race, and Commodity.” In this section, Marlene Tromp’s “Empire and the Indian Freak: The ‘Miniature Man’ from Cawnpore and the ‘Marvelous Indian Boy’ on Tour in England” explores the rendering of Indian freaks and reads their publicity materials and the scientific studies about them in the context of sociopolitical concerns regarding India as a colony. She argues that such performers and the rhetoric around them both exploited and undermined the beliefs that buttressed imperialism. Kelly Hurley’s “The Victorian Mummy-Fetish: H. Rider Haggard, Frank Aubrey, and the White Mummy” investigates imperial Gothic fiction at the British fin de siècle, to ask how the mummy, particularly the white mummy in “lost white civilization” novels, comes to serve as an uncanny double for the Western subject, a process both fearsome and pleasurable, a process with parallels to that of enfreakment. Finally, Rebecca Stern’s essay, “Our Bear Women, Ourselves: Affiliating with Julia Pastrana,” explores popular depictions of Pastrana’s live exhibitions in the 1850s alongside the subsequent exhibition of her embalmed corpse in the 1860s to explore national identity and gender. Pastrana’s dark-complexioned, hair-covered body crystallizes in reverse a prescription for Victorian white womanhood, warning that one ought not to be a spectacle. The essays in this section suggest that we must reckon with freakery in order to enrich our understanding of Victorian imperialism.

Martha Stoddard Holmes’s essay, “Queering the Marriage Plot: Wilkie Collins’s The Law and the Lady,” opens part IV, “Reading and Spectating the Freak,” which begins to look at the role of artistic representation in the social work of freakery. Stoddard Holmes suggests that, though critics have argued that people with disabilities were publicly reinscribed as objects of charity by the end of the eighteenth century, the fiction of the nineteenth century demonstrates the ways in which disabled bodies keep alive erotic curiosity as much as they did sympathy. Melissa Free’s “Freaks That Matter: The Dolls’ Dressmaker, The Doctor’s Assistant, and the Limits of Difference” also looks at fiction to explore the way in which Victorian culture valued at least some of the potential contributions of freaks—unless those figures were also marked by alternative sexualities. “Queer” figures were likely to be “sacrificed” for the social good. Finally, Christopher Smit deploys Levinas’s idea of collaboration
and “responsibility” to reconsider notions of the freak as an exploited or abused victim of the photographer. In “A Collaborative Aesthetic: Levinas’s Idea of Responsibility and the Photographs of Charles Eisenmann and the Late Nineteenth-Century Freak-Performer,” Smit argues that it was a much more mutually engaged process that valued physical difference rather than degrading it. In these artistic productions, we can see both how mainstream Victorian culture articulated freakery and how such notions were disseminated to the public.

As a body, these essays attempt to explore the impact of the freak on the nineteenth-century consciousness and social practices. While the concept of the freak and the practices associated with freakery were emerging across the world and had a visible (and critically traceable) relationship to the United States, freakery is no less crucial to understanding Victorian England. Though P. T. Barnum was an American son, his sideshows were in rich conversation with English past and present. Many of those figures who define our contemporary understanding of freaks—indeed, many of Barnum’s “human curiosities”—came from England. Rather than eliding the differences between the United States and England, these essays seek to examine the fruitful exchange between the two continents and with lands across Asia, Africa, and South America. This little-explored landscape is illuminated here with the hope that it will open further dialogue on the role of freakery in England’s evolving political and social world and the role of England in the evolving concept of freakery. The significant impact of disability studies, postcolonial studies, and queer studies on cultural, historical, and literary studies is also evident in these essays, and this collection seeks to speak to those fields as well as to scholars of the Victorian period to ask how freaks are situated in such a way as to reveal much about the culture and the period.

Notes

1. I have chosen to use this term—like Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Elizabeth Grosz, and Rachel Adams—for an array of reasons. What Garland-Thomson calls “freak discourse” has particular resonance in the nineteenth century, but the word “freak” is also apt for two political reasons relevant to this study: first, because of the potentially political reclamation of the term, a concept I will discuss further below, and second, because of what Adams calls the “plasticity” of the word—“freaks” is so fluid that it “cannot be aligned with any particular identity or ideological position.” See Rachel Adams, Sideshow U.S.A.: Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 10.

3. Ibid., 2.


5. Ibid., 56.


10. Actor Jamie Lee Curtis, whose womanhood few would question, is reportedly androgen insensitive.


12. This body of essays acknowledges the critical role that disability studies has played in our understanding of freaks, from Garland-Thomson’s work to Leonard J. Davis’s *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* and collections such as *The Body and Physical Difference*, edited by David T. Mitchell and Sarah L. Snyder. They also suggest that our responses might include and complicate these notions, particularly suggesting that the collapse of such binaries cannot accommodate all of the ways in which we might understand freakishness or its social effects.


15. Cook, 3.


20. Peggy Phelan makes an argument for live performances as enacting a non-reproductive economy of meaning in “The Ontology of Performance: Representation


27. Neil T. Harris, Humbug: The Art of P. T. Barnum (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973), 65. See also Cook on this important theme.


29. Cited in ibid., 33.

30. The bearded lady not only undermined stable notions of gender identity but also evoked the ultimate marker of femaleness, the uncovered vagina. It was often figured, unsettlingly, however, as the “vagina dentata,” a devouring and threatening version of femaleness that simultaneously seduces men and severs the “source” of their power. Julia Pastrana’s case serves to illustrate this metaphor in the obsessive and inaccurate assertion—even taken up even by Charles Darwin—that Pastrana had a double set of teeth (see ibid.).

The essays in this section are attempts to open some broader questions, through examination of particular material examples of freakery. Heather McHold’s essay serves as an introduction to the debates about who had the authority to demand ownership of and talking rights on “freakery,” examining P. T. Barnum in the context of his English reception. While her discussion reveals the role of performance advertisements and a rhetoric of middle-class respectability on medical discourse specifically, her argument also challenges us to think through what other British institutions might have been competing to create or might have been in part created by the discourse of freakery. Joyce Huff’s essay on Daniel Lambert and cultural rhetoric of consumption speaks to specifically British notions of consumption and class dynamics. Her essay provides an English refiguration of scholarship on American consumer capitalism and freakery. Finally, Timothy Neil’s essay offers a unique look at another freak discourse—that of animal freaks—to investigate the nineteenth-century English obsession with enfreakment. Based on rarely seen archival materials from the British National Fairgrounds Archive, his essay focuses on the role animal freaks played in relation to human freakishness.
While there is significant thematic overlap between the four sections of this book, this section attempts to plumb in greater depth what the previous section identifies as a preeminent discourse in the creation of freakery: science and medicine. Each of these essays, however, fleshes out these questions in relation to another British social tension as well. Meegan Kennedy’s essay provides an English Victorian inquiry that complements work like Tchen’s on Asians in the United States. She examines the social understanding of “monstrous or uncontrollable growth at the borders of British empire,” situating the “Oriental” in Britain, with regard to the medical management of Hoo Loo, a man with a massive testicular tumor. Christine Ferguson looks at physician Frederick Treves’s discursive manipulation of the famous Joseph Merrick as he “toured” London social circles. While it offers a particular focus on the famous “Elephant Man,” this argument opens up questions about the linguistic/textual production of freakery in general. Finally, Nadja Durbach looks at scientific discourses about evolution, ideologies of imperialism, and their relationship to Krao Farini, a Laotian woman who opened her career at the London Aquarium in 1883 exhibiting as the “missing link.” Durbach’s essay not only tackles science but also forms a link to the next section of the book, which addresses the role of empire and social perception of race in shaping—and understanding—freakery.
This section takes up a triad of related concerns: empire, race, and economics. While the essays in this section also speak to the “marketing” strategies of part I and the scientific discourses of part II, they are brought together here around the theme of empire making. Marlene Tromp’s essay looks at the place of the Indian freak exhibits in England, proposing that we must read Indian performers in the social context of empire and English-Indian relations. Kelly Hurley’s essay on the Victorian mummy obsession points to the ways that the anxieties over great ancient nonwhite civilizations were managed through the uncanny double of the white mummy—a figure revealing a commodity and sexual fetish that, like the cultural management of the freak, balms fears of racial degeneration or disappearance provoked by imperial activity. Rebecca Stern’s discussion of Julia Pastrana, the hair-covered “Bear Woman,” suggests that anxieties about empire were addressed in negative prescriptions for womanhood embodied in this famous masculinized/feminized performer. In all of these essays, the political and social implications of empire are laid against the freak show performer or the metaphor of the freak to enrich our understanding of both in their British context.
This last section asks questions about the literary and photographic—and thus, cultural—production of freaks, of their embodiment in various kinds of “text.” Through English fiction and through images, we can plumb the politics of material representation of freakery in nineteenth-century England. Martha Stoddard Holmes’s essay takes up Victorian novelist Wilkie Collins’s depictions of both marriage and the disabled body to ask questions about how the “irregular” and freakish were not simply sites of charity but also of eroticism. Melissa Free looks at both Collins and Charles Dickens to ask how the enfreaked characters demonstrate anxieties that underscore notions of freakishness when they suggestively represent alternative sexualities. Both of these essays build upon the broader social notions of English identity and freakery offered in previous sections. Finally, Christopher Smit closes the collection with a provocative theoretical discussion that challenges notions of freak representation and volition in the foundational work of Rosemarie Garland-Thomson and others, reading the freaks as active and enabled participants in their own production.
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