

is predator and yet feminine, he is consumer and producer, he is parasite and host, he is homosexual and heterosexual, he is even a lesbian. Monsters and the Gothic fiction that creates them are therefore technologies, narrative technologies, figure for negative everything the way for the invention of the middle class, and

But Gothic is a generic spin that turns the beautiful into the monstrous, this transformation is a beautiful fable. A brilliant performance happens when a reader of Burton's surrealism (1993). *Nightmare* about what happens over Christmas. In this film, are sometimes or occasions by their festive representation of Santa Claus. Indeed religious or superstitious meanings of these holidays are almost entirely absent from the plot. Jack Skeleton is a kind of monster who languishes in fear and maintains every year. He is a Christmas one who wanders beyond the woods beyond that he wants to be of Halloween.

The transformation of Halloween is the presents and all transformed into fanged manner of skeletons parents are shown and mayhem of sentimental hero body to restore back to his previous damage has been done. Christmas, the night

of a transcendent generosity, goodwill, and community love has been unmasked as just another consumer ritual and its icons have been exposed as simply toys without teeth or masks that smile instead of grimace. The nature of Christmas has unraveled to be the easy target of make it Gothic.

It suggests that, at least in the gothicization seems to have radicalizing effects, it is hard to tell whether the genre registers a conservative

Of course, Gothic is mobile and therefore, to succumb so easily to claim for its political claims seem as if there has been in the uses of Gothic in the nineteenth century to the present my study attempts to use horror film in order to disrupt dominant culture of family, heterosexu-

ality, ethnicity, and class politics. It disrupts, furthermore, the logic of genre that essentializes generic categories and stabilizes the production within them. Gothic film produces models of reading (attention) that allow for multiplicity and a plurality of location.

## ROSEMARIE GARLAND-THOMSON, "FROM WONDER TO ERROR: A GENEALOGY OF FREAK DISCOURSE IN MODERNITY," from *FREAKERY: CULTURAL SPECTACLES OF THE EXTRAORDINARY BODY*

### Critical Introduction

ROSEMARIE GARLAND-THOMSON (1946–) is Professor of English and Co-Director of the Emory Disability Studies Initiative at Emory University. She specializes in American literature and culture, which she approaches from the perspective of disability studies—a field she helped to found—as well as feminism, and, more recently, bioethics. Among Garland-Thomson's notable contributions to monster studies is her reframing of "disability"—often seen as a source of sorrow, a failure and lack—to a source of wonder. Instead of using terms like "deformed" or "disabled," she writes about "exceptional," "unexpected," and, most pointedly, "extraordinary" bodies. In so doing, she creates a positive discourse to describe and discuss non-normative bodies.

Garland-Thomson's major publications include her authored books—*Staring: How We Look* (Oxford University Press, 2009), *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (Columbia University Press, 1997)—and a series of edited collections. Here, we present "From Wonder to Error: A Genealogy of Freak Discourse in Modernity," which is the introduction to *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (New York University Press, 1996). In this essay, Garland-Thomson argues for her new vocabulary of the extraordinary while exploring the shifts in perceptions of non-normative bodies over time. Through a consideration of the circus and sideshow practices of the Victorian period, she argues that "freaks" are not born. Instead, they are made by culture through a process she refers to as "enfreakment," a term she borrows from David Hevey, a disability theorist, author, filmmaker, and photographer. Enfreakment is the series of "cultural rituals that stylize, silence, differentiate, and distance the persons whose bodies

the freak-hunters or showmen colonize and commercialize." As she writes, "the monstrous body exists in societies to be exploited for someone else's purposes."

### Reading Questions

What does it mean to argue that nobody is born a "freak," but made into one through cultural processes? How might we apply this insight to other figures considered "monsters" or "monstrous"?

### Editorial Notes

We here present most of the introductory chapter to Garland-Thomson's book, leaving off the final section containing an outline of the rest of the book's chapters. The original images used in her essay were not available, so we have substituted similar images of the same performers. We have also reduced the total number of illustrations.

### Further Reading

- Bogdan, Robert. *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1988.
- Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie, ed. *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*. New York: New York University Press, 1996.
- Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997.
- Stewart, Susan. *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984.

33 [Halberstam refers to the protagonist of the film "Nightmare" as "the monster" and "the freak"]

# "FROM WONDER TO ERROR: A GENEALOGY OF FREAK DISCOURSE IN MODERNITY," FROM FREAKERY: CULTURAL SPECTACLES OF THE EXTRAORDINARY BODY

ROSEMARIE GARLAND-THOMSON

PEOPLE WHO ARE visually different have always provoked the imaginations of their fellow human beings. Those of us who have been known since antiquity as "monsters" and more recently as "freaks" defy the ordinary and mock the predictable, exciting both anxiety and speculation among our more banal brethren. History bears ample witness to this profound disquiet stirred in the human soul by bodies that stray from what is typical or predictable. Such troubled fascination with the different body has occasioned enduring cultural icons that range from the cyclopic *Polyphemus* and the gigantic Goliath to werewolves and the seven adorable little dwarfs. Perhaps even the founding Judeo-Christian myth that Adam's body contained Eve, drenched as it is by millennia of interpretation, derives from reports of the rare condition *fetus in fetu*, in which tumors encasing fetuses are embedded in the bodies of their living siblings.<sup>1</sup> The presence of the anomalous human body, at once familiar and alien, has unfolded as well within the collective cultural consciousness into fanciful hybrids such as centaurs, griffins, satyrs, minotaurs, sphinxes, mermaids, and cyclopes—all figures that are perhaps the mythical explanations for the startling bodies whose curious lineaments gesture toward other modes of being and confuse comforting distinctions between what is human and what is not. What seems clearest in all this, however, is that the extraordinary body is fundamental to the narratives by which we make sense of ourselves and our world.

By its very presence, the exceptional body seems to compel explanation, inspire representation, and incite regulation. The unexpected body fires rich, if anxious, narratives and practices that probe the contours and

boundaries of what we take to be human. Stone Age cave drawings, for example, record monstrous births, while prehistoric gravesites evince elaborate ritual sacrifices of such bodies. Clay tablets at the Assyrian city of Nineveh describe in detail sixty-two of what we would now call congenital abnormalities, along with their prophetic meanings. Aristotle, Cicero, *Pliny*, *Augustine*, Bacon, and Montaigne account for such disruptions of the seemingly natural order in their interpretative schemata. For these fathers of Western thought, the differently formed body is most often evidence of God's design, divine wrath, or nature's abundance, but it is always an interpretive occasion.

Perpetually significant, the singular body has been alternately coveted, revered, and dreaded. Their rarity made exceptional bodies instrumental and lucrative to those who appropriated them, even in precapitalist societies. For example, Egyptian kings, Roman aristocrats, and European royalty kept dwarfs and fools as amusing pets. Cheap, popular "monster ballads" in Renaissance England detailed the corporeal particulars of anomalous bodies and uncovered their hidden lessons: a cleft palate cautioned against lewd talk; missing fingers warned against idleness. An anxious England even made bestiality a capital offense in 1534, lest the occasional, unsettling birth anomalies that suggested hybridity might burgeon uncontrolled as testimonies to some threatening cousinship between man and beast.<sup>2</sup> Tributes to Matthew Buchinger—who was virtually armless and legless, but nevertheless powdered and wigged—record that he dazzled eighteenth-century Europe with his conjuring, musical performances, calligraphic skills, and marksmanship with the pistol.<sup>3</sup>

2 Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World* (New York: Pantheon, 1982), 125.



Figure 11.1. Charles Tripp, the "Armless Wonder," demonstrates his ability to eat with his feet.

Learned gentlemen of the early Enlightenment collected relics of the increasingly secularized monstrous body in their eclectic cabinets of curiosities, along with an array of oddities such as sharks' teeth, fossils, and intricately carved cherrystones.<sup>4</sup> As scientific inquiry began to eclipse religious justification, the internal anatomy of exceptional bodies was exposed in the dissection theaters and represented in early medical treatises upon which reputations were built. The cabinet of curiosity commercialized into such equally diverse popular museums as P. T. Barnum's famous American Museum, all replete with their sensationalized, hyperbolic narratives.<sup>5</sup> The ancient practice of

4 Oliver Impey and Arthur MacGregor, eds., *The Origins of Museums* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), 4.

exhibiting anomalous bodies in taverns and on streetcorners consolidated in the nineteenth century into institutions such as American circus sideshows or London's Bartholemew Fair, where showmen and monster-mongers proliferated in response to a seemingly insatiable desire to gawk contemplatively at these marvelous phenomena.<sup>6</sup> In a definitive bifurcation from the popular, nineteenth-century science officially enunciated teratology as the study, classification, and manipulation of monstrous bodies. As scientific explanation eclipsed religious mystery to become the authoritative cultural narrative of modernity, the exceptional body began increasingly to be represented in clinical terms as pathology, and the monstrous body moved from the freak show stage into the medical theater. Thus, even though the discourses of the anomalous body comprise a series of successive reframings within a variety of registers over time, the uneasy human impulse to textualize, to contain, to explain our most unexpected corporeal manifestations to ourselves has remained constant.<sup>7</sup>

Brown, 1973); and A. H. Saxon, *P.T. Barnum: The Legend and the Man* (New York: New York University Press, 1989).

6 Richard D. Altick, *The Shows of London* (Cambridge: Belknap, 1978).

7 The history of monsters and freaks is found in Gould and Pyle, *Anomalies and Curiosities*; *John Block Friedman*, *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981); Mark V. Barrow, "A Brief History of Teratology," in *Problems of Birth Defects*, ed. T. V. N. Persaud (Baltimore: University Park Press, 1977), 18–28; Josef Warkany, "Congenital Malformations in the Past," in *Problems of Birth Defects*, ed. T. V. N. Persaud (Baltimore: University Park Press, 1977), 5–17; Dudley Wilson, *Signs and Portents: Monstrous Births from the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment* (London: Routledge, 1993); Charles J. S. Thompson, *The Mystery and Lore of Monsters* (New Hyde Park: University Books, 1968); Kathryn Park and Lorraine Daston, "Unnatural Conceptions: The Study of Monsters in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century France and England," *Past and Present: A Journal of Historical Studies* 92 (August 1981): 20–54; Yi-Fu Tuan, *Dominance and Affection: The Making of Pets* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 12.

As this very brief recapitulation of the exceptional body's appropriations in Western culture implies, what we might call "freak discourse" can be seen as a single gauge registering a historical shift from the ancient to the modern era. Although extraordinary bodily forms have always been acknowledged as atypical, the cultural resonances accorded them arise from the historical and intellectual moments in which these bodies are embedded. Because such bodies are rare, unique, material, and confounding of cultural categories, they function as magnets to which culture secures its anxieties, questions, and needs at any given moment. Like the bodies of females and slaves, the monstrous body exists in societies to be exploited for someone else's purposes. Thus, singular bodies become politicized when culture maps its concerns upon them as meditations on individual as well as national values, identity, and direction. Under the extreme pressures of modernity, it would seem, the significances imposed upon such bodies intensified and the modes of representation proliferated in ways from which we can coax fresh cultural understandings.

As a way to introduce the chapters that comprise this volume, I want to suggest in rather broad strokes here how freak discourse is both imbricated in and reflective of our collective cultural transformation into modernity. The trajectory of historical change in the ways the anomalous body is framed within the cultural imagination—what I am calling here the freak discourse's genealogy—can be characterized simply as a movement from a narrative of the marvelous to a narrative of the deviant. As modernity develops in western culture, freak discourse logs the change: the prodigious monster transforms into the pathological terata; what was once sought after as revelation becomes pursued as entertainment; what aroused awe now inspires horror; what was taken as a portent shifts to a site of progress. In brief: wonder becomes error.

Consider, for instance, the semantic distinctions applied to anomalous bodies over time. Never simply itself, the exceptional body betokens something else, becomes revelatory, sustains narrative, exists socially in a realm of hyper-representation. Indeed, the word *monster*—perhaps the earliest and most enduring name for the singular body—derives from the Latin *monstra*, meaning to warn, show, or sign, and which has given us the modern verb *demonstrate*. Monsters were taken as a showing forth of divine will from antiquity until the hand of God seemingly loosed its grip on the world. When the gods lapsed into silence, monsters became an index of Nature's fancy or—as they now appear in genetics and embryology—the Rosetta Stone that reveals the mechanics of life. As portents, monsters were the premier manifestation of a varied group of astonishing natural phenomena known as prodigies, marvels, or wonders. Under the sign of the miraculous, comets, earthquakes, six-legged calves, cyclopic pigs, and human monsters confirmed, repudiated, or revised what humanity imagined as the order of things. By challenging the boundaries of the human and the coherence of what seemed to be the natural world, monstrous bodies appeared as sublime, merging the terrible with the wonderful, equalizing repulsion with attraction.

Whether generating awe, delight, terror, or knowledge, the monstrous emerges from culture-bound expectations even as it violates them. Certainly the cultural relativity of what counts as monstrous is witnessed by the medieval Wonder Books, which imagined as monsters the alien races of distant geographies, particularly those of "The East."<sup>8</sup> In a similar genre, the French surgeon **Ambroise Paré** in 1573 conflated what we would today see as the normal, the deviant, and the fanciful in an illustrated treatise on monsters that catalogues together marvels such as conj d gi h hrodites, sea  
devi e , u s, s, incubi, and

Bogdan, *Freak Show: Pres* ting H an Oddities  
far Amusement and Profit hicago niversity of  
Chicago Press, 1988); Dani P Man *Freaks We*  
8 Friedman, *Monstrous Races*, and Mary Bane

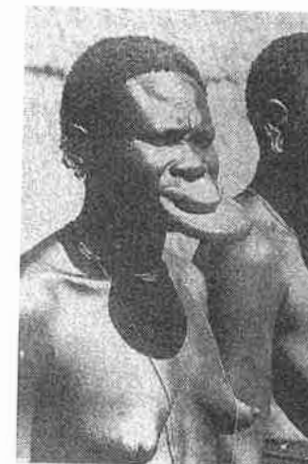


Figure 11.2. Lipstretching, often exoticized in circuses and freak shows, in an African tribe.

Egyptian mermaids.<sup>9</sup> Paré's *Des Monstres et prodigies* straddles the seam between wonder and error; between marvelous and medicalized narratives of the anomalous body. Along with the traditional divinely driven explanations, Paré initiates a secular, clinical approach to monsters that runs parallel to and competes with religious interpretations, finally eclipsing them around the beginning of the twentieth century. This incipient scientific view, which depends upon the fantasy of objectivity and sees regularity rather than exceptionality as founding epistemology, imposes empiricism upon the narrative of wonder that had ranged relatively freely across earlier representations of monsters. By the seventeenth century this alternative humanistic, scientific discourse, which endorses the predictable, entwines itself with the idea of religious prodigies, casting extraordinary bodies as nature's benevolent whimsies, bestowed upon the world to delight man's curiosity and inspire his awe. This is not, however, the awe of divine warning, but rather an implication that the world exists increasingly not to glorify god but to please man, who is destined to be its master.  
Is, the notion of the monster as prodigy fades at this juncture, transfiguring singular bodies into *lusus naturae*, nature's sport or the freak of nature. As divine design disengages

from the natural world in the human mind, the word *freak* emerges to express capricious variegation or sudden, erratic change. **Milton's** *Lycidas* seems to have initiated *freak* into English in 1637 to mean a fleck of color. By the seventeenth century *freak* broadens to mean whimsy or fancy. Not until 1847 does the word become synonymous with human corporeal anomaly. Thus, *wonder*, which enters the language as early as 700, separates from augury to become whimsy as Enlightenment thinking begins to rationalize the world. What was once ominous marvel now becomes gratuitous oddity as monsters shift into the category of *curiosities*.<sup>10</sup> Curiosity fuses inquisitiveness, acquisitiveness, and novelty to the ancient pursuit of the extraordinary body, shifting the ownership of such bodies from God to the scientist, whose *Wunderkammern*, or cabinets of curiosities, antedate modern museums. Simultaneous with the secularism that finds delight in nature's corporeal jokes arises the contrasting empiricism that creates the knowledge used to drive fancy from the world.

Consequently, at just the historical moment when the foreboding monster transforms into the whimsical freak, the Enlightenment logic Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno have termed "the disenchantment of the world" produces teratology, the science of monstros-

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ity that eventually tames and rationalizes the wondrous freak.<sup>11</sup> Formally articulated in 1832 by the French zoologist Isidore Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, teratology recasts the freak from astonishing corporeal extravagance into the pathological specimen of the terata. Mastered and demythologized by modernity, then, is the marvelously singular body whose terrible presence in the world quickened such cultural narratives as *Genesis* and the *Odyssey*. Domesticated within the laboratory and the textbook, what was once the prodigious monster, the fanciful freak, the strange and subtle curiosity of nature, has become today the abnormal, the intolerable. The exceptional body thus becomes what Arnold Davidson calls an "especially vicious normative violation," demanding genetic reconstruction, surgical normalization, therapeutic elimination, or relegation to pathological specimen.<sup>12</sup>

In response to the tensions of modernity, the ancient practice of interpreting extraordinary bodies not only shifted toward the secular and the rational, but it flourished as never before within the expanding marketplace, institutionalized under the banner of the freak show. Especially in Victorian America, the exhibition of freaks exploded into a public ritual that bonded a sundering polity together in the collective act of looking. In a turbulent era of social and material change, the spectacle of the extraordinary body stimulated curiosity, ignited speculation, provoked titillation, furnished novelty, filled coffers, confirmed commonality, and certified national identity. From the Jacksonian to the Progressive eras, Americans flocked to freak shows. With the older narrative of wonder still culturally tenable and the newer narrative of error ever more compelling, the mid-nineteenth to early twentieth centuries comprised a heightened, transitional moment for such ceremonial displays. Redo-

lent with the older authority of the prodigious, infused with the fitfulness of the fanciful, and susceptible to the certainties of scientific positivism, the singular body on exhibit was ripe for reading.<sup>13</sup>

But before we probe further the ways the freak show entwines itself with the social, economic, political, and ideological structures of what was arguably America's most intense period of modernization, we should first explore the conventions of display that created Victorian America's celebrated freaks. The early itinerant monster-mongers who exhibited human oddities in taverns and the slightly more respectable performances in rented halls evolved in the mid-nineteenth century into institutionalized, permanent exhibitions of freaks in dime museums and later in circus sideshows, fairs, and amusement park midways. The apotheosis of museums, which both inaugurated and informed the myriad dime museums that followed, was P. T. Barnum's American Museum, which he purchased and revitalized in 1841. Later, Barnum shaped the circus into the three-ringed extravaganza, infusing it with vigor and freaks well into the twentieth century. Until the turn of the century, dime museums proliferated, offering spectacles of amusement parading as edification to all classes of Americans.<sup>14</sup> Human freaks were the central magnets of Barnum's showplace and all successive dime museums. In the museums' curio halls and lecture rooms as well as on the sideshows' stages and platforms gathered an astonishing array of corporeal wonders, from wild men of Borneo to fat ladies, living skeletons, Fiji princes, albinos, bearded women, Siamese twins, tattooed Circassians, armless and legless wonders, Chinese giants, cannibals, midget triplets, hermaphrodites, spotted boys, and much more. Augment-

13 For a discussion of prodigies and religion in America, see Michael P. Winship, "Prodigies, Puritanism, and the Perils of Natural Philosophy: The Example of Cotton Mather," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d series, L1, no. 1 (January 1994): 92-105.

14 The words *muse* and *amusement* both descend

ing the marvelous bodies were ancillary performers and curiosities such as ventriloquists, performing geese, mesmerists, beauty contestants, contortionists, sharpshooters, trained goats, frog eaters, sword-swallowers, tumbling monkeys, boa constrictors, canaries whistling "Yankee Doodle," and a "Nail King" who drove nails through boards with his teeth.<sup>15</sup> From the Prince of Wales and Henry James to families and the humblest immigrants, Americans gathered at this most democratizing institution to gaze raptly at the ineffable other who was both the focus and the creation of the freak show's hyperbolic conventions of display.<sup>16</sup>

The exaggerated, sensationalized discourse that is the freak show's essence ranged over the seemingly singular bodies that we would now call either "physically disabled" or "exotic ethnics," framing them and heightening their differences from viewers, who were rendered comfortably common and safely standard by the exchange. Freak discourse structured a cultural ritual that seized upon any deviation from the typical, embellishing and intensifying it to produce a human spectacle whose every somatic feature was laden with significance before the gaping spectator. An animal-skin wrap, a spear, and some grunting noises, for example, made a retarded black man into the Missing Link. Irregular pigmentation enhanced by a loincloth and some palm fronds produced the Leopard Boy. Feathers, blankets, and a seven-pound hammer turned an "ordinary nigger" into the Ironed-Skulled Prince.<sup>17</sup> Shaved heads, top-knots, and gaudy tunics render two microcephalics into the Aztec Children. Congenital anomalies and

15 George C. D. Odell, *Annals of the New York Stage* (1927-49; reprint, New York: AMS Press, 1970), 14:1888-91; and William G. FitzGerald, "Side-Shows," parts 1-4, *Strand Magazine*, March-June 1897, 321-28, 405-16, 521-28, 776-80.

16 Brooks McNamara, "A Congress of Wonders: The Rise and Fall of the Dime Museum," *Emerson Society Quarterly* 20, no. 3 (1974): 216-32; Marcello Truzzi, "Circus and Side Shows," in *American Popular Entertainment*, ed. Myron Matlaw (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1979) 175-85; and James B. Twitchell, *Carnival Culture: The Trashing of Taste in America*

progressive or hereditary conditions yielded imaginative hybrids of the human and animal reminiscent of classical satyrs, centaurs, or minotaurs: the Turtle Boy, the Mule-Faced Woman, Serpentina, the Camel Girl, the Dog-Faced Boy, the Bear Woman, the Lobster Boy, the Lion Woman, the Alligator Man, and Sealo. Bodies whose forms appeared to transgress rigid social categories such as race, gender, and personhood were particularly good grist for the freak mill. Albino Africans with dreadlocks, double-genitaled hermaphrodites, bearded women, fat boys, half-people, the legless and/or armless, and conjoined twins violated the categorical boundaries that seem to order civilization and inform individuality. Such hybridity, along with excess and absence, are the threatening organizational principles that constituted freakdom. At once dangerous and alluring, this cultural space of seemingly infinite license is what the freak shows both amplified and contained with their conventions of display.

An interlocking set of stylized, highly embellished narratives fashioned unusual bodies into freaks within the formalized spaces of shows, museums, fairs, and circuses. The four entwined narrative forms that produced freaks were, first, the oral spiel—often called the "lecture" that was delivered by the showman or "professor" who usually managed the exhibited person; second, the often fabricated or fantastic textual accounts—both long pamphlets and broadside or newspaper advertisements—of the freak's always extraordinary life and identity; third, the staging, which included costuming, choreography, performance, and the spatial relation to the audience; and fourth, drawings or photographs that disseminated an iterable, fixed, collectible visual image of staged freakishness that penetrated into the Victorian parlor and family album. For commercial ends, freak exhibits enlisted, then, the oral and visual senses as well as their technological prosthetics, the reproducible printed word and image, to bombard actual and potential audiences with the freaks that their conventions manufactured.

Although commercial hyperbole drove all these narrative modes, the linguistic

11 Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (1944; reprint, London: Allen Lane, 1973), 3; see also Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York: Scribner's, 1971).

12 Arnold I. Davidson, "The Horror of Monsters,"



Figure 11.3. A common practice at freak shows was to juxtapose stark physical differences.

ted the credulous; the mundane flanked the peculiar. One example is the sensationally embroidered printed biographies of the freak's life, accomplishments, and corporeal irregularities. According to one pamphlet, the pregnant mother of the hirsute Madame Howard, the Lion Woman, was attacked by lions that her brave father then slew. Similarly, the Lobster Boy's fate was determined when his pregnant mother allegedly fainted at the sight of her husband's exceptionally large catch of the day.<sup>18</sup> Tattooed white men were ostensibly captured and tortured by cannibals. Missing Links were discovered in the jungles of darkest Africa. The armless and legless performed on stage, with their alternative limbs, such ordinary tasks as violin playing, calligraphy, needlework, or taking tea, which were then detailed in inflated language that makes them remarkable even



as it invites pity and admiration. Autographed souvenir cabinet photographs or the extremely popular *cartes d'visites* literally framed freaks by surrounding them with enhancing props like jungle backdrops or by juxtaposing giants with midgets, for instance, or fat men with human skeletons to intensify by contrast their bodily differences.<sup>19</sup> Presented along with the printed souvenirs were the oral narratives of the showman's pitch, the lecturer's yarn, and the "professor's" pseudo-authoritative accounts—all ornamented with the lurid and dramatized to the point of caricature. Respected medical doctors authenticated the exhibits by detailing their examinations in language at once clinical and reverent. Costuming enhanced the extraordinary quality of the freak's body, and staging established distance as well as literal hierarchies between the group of spectators and the lone spectacle on the elevated platform

or in the sunken pit. Living skeletons wore leotards; fat or bearded ladies sported frills and jewels; hermaphrodites dressed in half-male and half-female outfits; Zulu warriors became alien by way of animal skins, spears, whoops, and jungle scenes. Conventionalized stage names created parodic juxtapositions as well. Midgets always had inflated titles from "high" society, such as Commodore Nutt, General Tom Thumb, Princess Wee-wee; fat ladies' names, such as Dolly Dimples, Captivat' Liz, and Winsome Winnie, mocked feminine scripts. Taken together, these mediating narratives, as well as the cultural premise of irreducible corporeal difference upon which the freak show was founded, comprise the process David Hevey calls "enfreakment."<sup>20</sup>

Enfreakment emerges from cultural rituals that stylize, silence, differentiate, and distance the persons whose bodies the freak-hunters or showmen colonize and commercialize. Paradoxically, however, at the same time that enfreakment elaborately foregrounds specific bodily eccentricities, it also collapses all those differences into a "freakery," a single amorphous category of corporeal otherness. By constituting the freak as an icon of generalized embodied deviance, the exhibitions also simultaneously reinscribed gender, race, sexual aberrance, ethnicity, and disability as inextricable yet particular exclusionary systems legitimated by bodily variation—all represented by the single multivalent figure of the freak. Thus, what we assume to be a freak of nature was instead a freak of culture.<sup>21</sup>

The freak show made more than freaks: it fashioned as well the self-governed, iterable subject of democracy—the American cultural self. Parading at once as entertainment and education, the institutionalized social process of enfreakment united and validated the disparate throng positioned as viewers. A freak show's cultural work is to make the physical particularity of the freak into a hypervisible text against which the viewer's indistinguish-

able body fades into a seemingly neutral, tractable, and invulnerable instrument of the autonomous will, suitable to the uniform abstract citizenry democracy institutes. Yet the freaks' popularity—the strange blend of reverence and condescension audiences registered—suggests ambivalence toward such forfeiture of the bodily distinction that marked eminence in traditional societies. Bound together by their purchased assurance that they are not freaks, the fascinated onlookers perhaps longed in some sense to be extraordinary marvels instead of mundane, even banal, democrats in a confusing cultural moment. Nevertheless, the privileged state of disembodiment that the freak show conferred upon its spectators, however fraudulent, must have been seductive. It evidently was well worth the dime or quarter at a time when modernization rendered the meaning of bodily differences and vulnerabilities increasingly unstable and threatening.

The freak show's golden age occurred specifically within the productive context of nineteenth-century America's swift and chaotic modernization. That rich cultural matrix provided a conducive environment for the archaic custom of exhibiting and interpreting extraordinary bodies and alien cultures to thrive in the invigorated form of the freak show. But the very cultural and socioeconomic conditions that animated anew this ancient, almost anachronistic, practice composed the very context that at the same time rendered it obsolete, making the freak show today virtually synonymous with bad taste, a practice that has gone the way of public executions. In the escalating upheaval of modernization between about 1840 through 1940, what we now think of as the freak show flared like a comet and then vanished from view, re-emerging in almost unrecognizable forms in the late twentieth century.<sup>22</sup> Although it is impossible to disentangle or establish causality among the interlocking and mutually determining cultural phenomena that quickened and then quieted the freak show, let us nevertheless try roughly to uncouple the forces modernization brought to bear on the exhibition of the anomalous body.

18 The theory of maternal impression as a source

20 David Hevey, *The Creatures That Time Forgot: Photography and Disability Imagery* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 53.

Most fundamentally, modernization reconstituted the human body. Freak shows became ritual sites where the uncertain polity could anxiously contemplate the new parameters of embodiment that cultural transformations had wrought. The changes in production, labor, technology, and market relations that we loosely call industrialization redeployed and often literally reconfigured the body, perhaps turning America's collective eyes more attentively on the extraordinary body for explanation, validation, or simply comfort. Machine culture created new somatic geographies. For example, the decline of the apprentice system, the rise of the machine and the factory, as well as wage labor, put bodies on arbitrary schedules instead of allowing natural rhythms to govern activity. Rather than machines acting as prosthetics for the human body as they had in traditional cultures, the body under industrialization began to seem more like an extension of the machine, which threatened to replace the working body or at the least restructure its relation to labor. Efficiency, a concept rooted in the mechanical, ascended to prominence as a measurement of bodily value. Mechanized practices such as standardization, mass production, and interchangeable parts promoted sameness of form as a cultural value and made singularity in both products and bodies seem deviant. The professionalization of authority, wage labor, the logic of slavery and abolition, as well as the women's rights movement challenged the common citizen's sense of autonomy and mastery over his own body and others' bodies. Moreover, industrial accidents as well as the technologies and scale of the Civil War literally changed the shapes of human bodies on a dramatic new scale. Both sentimentalism and realism, the major representational modes of the freak show period, register in differing ways the concern with the place and meaning of the body. If this new body felt alien to the ordinary citizen, the freak's bizarre embodiment could assuage viewers uneasiness either by functioning as a touchstone of anxious identification or as an assurance of their regularized normalcy.<sup>23</sup>

Modernization not only reimagined and reshaped the body, it relocated it as well. The new geography of labor changed the physical relationships between bodies, literally separating workers from owners, the skilled from the unskilled, men from women and children. Mental and manual work migrated apart. Transportation systems and new work patterns moved people from farms and familial contexts into cities as well as into anonymous social and labor hierarchies. Wage labor and urbanization created unstructured leisure time and forged situational, transient relationships, while change stimulated a taste for the novel. In addition to restless physical migrations, a surging marketplace both promised and threatened social mobility founded upon unstable incomes. All these dislocations created anonymity, forcing people to rely upon bodily appearance rather than kinship or local memberships as indices of identity and social position.<sup>24</sup> In addition, secularization deemphasized the condition of one's soul, while an intensifying market system spawned the anxious display of status, and technologies such as portraiture photography located identity in one's exterior image. Social upheavals such as immigration, emancipation, and feminism—along with discriminatory responses such as nativism, segregation, and eugenics—depended upon the logic of visual corporeal differences for their coherence and enactment. Consequently, the way the body looked and functioned became one's primary social resource as local contexts receded, support networks unraveled, and mobility dominated social life.

versity Press, 1990); for a history of disability in America, see Deborah A. Stone, *The Disabled State* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984). For discussions of the body in modernity, see Mark Seltzer, *Bodies and Machines* (New York: Routledge, 1992); David S. Landes, *Revolution in Time: Clocks and the Making of the Modern World* (Cambridge: Belknap, 1983); and Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974).

24 Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted*

In this way, modernity effected a standardization of everyday life that saturated the entire social fabric, producing and reinforcing the concept of an unmarked, normative, leveled body as the dominant subject of democracy. Clocks, department stores, ready-made clothing, catalogues, advertising, and factory items sculpted the prosaic toward sameness, while increased literacy and the iterable nature of a burgeoning print culture fortified the impulse toward conformity. With its dependence on predictability, scientific discourse also reimagined the body, deprecating particularity while valorizing uniformity. Statistics quantified the body; evolution provided a new heritage; eugenics and teratology policed its boundaries; prosthetics normalized it; and asylums cordoned off deviance. Additionally, allopathic, professionalized medicine consolidated its dominance, casting as pathological all departures from the standard body. Finally, the notion of progress and the ideology of improvement—always a fraught consolation against the vagaries of contingency—implemented the ascendance of this new image of a malleable, regularized body whose attainment was both an individual and national obligation.<sup>25</sup>

Thus the iconography of social status transformed as the polity concerned itself with the subtleties of decoding bodies pressed toward the homogenous, even while the ideology of individualism called for distinction. In the midst of this communal quest for identity, the extravagantly marked, pliant figure of the freak quietly commanded the imaginations of practically everyone. During a confusing era, the freak body represented at once boundless liberty and appalling disorder, the former the promise and the latter the threat of democracy. The enterprising entrepreneur capitalized on all of this amid the prevailing culture of exhibition in which eager and puzzled citizens sought truth, meaning, edification, and distraction within a ceremonial cultural space that ritually fused the visual with the textual.

25 Paul Starr, *The Social Transformation of American Medicine* (New York: Basic Books, 1982); and David Rothman, *The Discovery of the Asylum: Social Order*

This standardization of life and body under modernity was accompanied by a tendency toward compartmentalization and stratification. As culture became more dynamic, complex, and literate with modernization, broad discourses tended to cleave into multiple, discrete discursive systems inflected by an elaborate system of social markers. Such differentiation created, for example, myriad branches of specialized knowledge and work, each located somewhere on the ladder of social status. In democratized nineteenth-century America, class distinctions solidified, bifurcating cultural discourses as well into high and low.<sup>26</sup> Swept along on this wave, freak show discourse, which from premodern times had been primarily iconographic—that is, of the show, whether religious or secular—began to be intersected by literate, scientific discourse and to fragment into an array of specialized discourses, some popular and some elite. With this dispersion of discourses, Victorian middle-class decorum's project of self-definition increasingly repudiated the popular freak show, while sentimentality recast awe into pity, and other forms of visual entertainment like theater—and, later, movies—proliferated. Thus the freak show itself—which although perpetually democratic, had always vexed respectability—came to rest irrevocably at the bottom of low culture. Indeed, the word "freak" was stigmatized enough by 1898 that the Barnum and Bailey Circus replaced it with the term "human curiosities" by 1903, supposedly in response to a group protest by the circus freak performers.<sup>27</sup>

26 Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988); and Stuart M. Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle-Class: Social Experience in the City, 1760–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

27 Bruce A. McConachie, "Museum Theater and the Problem of Respectability for Mid-Century Urban Americans," in *The American Stage: Social and Economic Issues from the Colonial Period to the Present*, ed. Ron Engle and Tice L. Miller (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 65–80; "The Unraveling of the Freaks," *Barnum and Bailey Route*

Yet before the freak show broke off from respectable society around the turn of the century, it was a central element in our collective cultural project of representing the body. Although the earlier freak show, with its hybrid of old wonder narratives, commercialized show narratives, and clinical scientific narratives, seems today to have dissipated, it has instead dispersed and transformed. Freak discourse did not vanish with the shows, but proliferated into a variety of contemporary discourses that still allude to its premises. Before this dissemination, however, the exhibition of freaks was inextricably entwined with an array of now-discrete discourses that were then only beginning to differentiate from one another in the nineteenth century. Genetics, embryology, anatomy, teratology, and reconstructive surgery—the discrete, high scientific discourses that now pathologize the extraordinary body—were once closely linked with the showmen's display of the freak body. The equally elite discourses of anthropology and ethnology, as well as museum culture and taxidermy, were inseparable from the display of freaks in the early nineteenth century. The entertainment discourses of vaudeville, circuses, beauty pageants, zoos, horror films, rock celebrity culture, and Epcot Center have descended from the freak show, to which displays of these kinds were once fused.