

Neo-Victorian freakery: the cultural afterlife of the Victorian freak show

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Neo-Victorian freakery: the cultural afterlife of the Victorian freak show, by

Helen Davies, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, vi + 239 pp., £58.00 (hardcover), ISBN 978-1-137-40255-4

This book is the first monograph on the cultural afterlives of notable ‘freaks’ who lived in the long nineteenth century, here broadly defined as the Victorian era. The author investigates what happens when the Victorian spectacle of freakery is appropriated and re-imagined in contemporary cultural products – texts (literary, audio-visual or other) that have been defined as neo-Victorian. While the geographical distribution of examples can be seen as testing the limits of neo-Victorian purview, it remains firmly anchored to the field’s preoccupations with the global impact of the British Empire. As such, it is a welcome contribution to neo-Victorian studies, the burgeoning new field of academic inquiry into the predominantly contemporary uses of Victorian literature and culture across media. Davies’s book expands the theoretical conceptualisation of neo-Victorianism by applying insights from, and recent developments in, disability studies, especially where the latter complements the former’s concerns about the ethics of appropriating real-life figures as fictional protagonists. In the process, she complicates and transforms definitions of neo-Victorian literature as acts of ‘re-membering’ – or piecing together – the often forgotten, marginalised, or little known fragments of the Victorian past (6). In addition, she points to the complex issues that are brought to the fore when investigating the ethics behind authors’ decisions to ‘re-member’ the unusual bodies in their texts, and the ideological implications of the reader’s desire to ‘re-member’ and identify with the ‘freakish bodies’ by consuming such texts (6, 7). Davies warns that ‘to appropriate the subject with an extraordinary body as a site of identification, personal or universal, runs the risk of negating the personhood of the subject on display’ (7). Highlighting neo-Victorianism’s tendency to reveal the hidden, marginalised, and non-heteronormative stories about the Victorian era, Davies suggests that the sexualised connotation of ‘re-membering’ can also become useful when examining ‘sexsational’ narratives about the Victorians where sexsation (a term introduced by Marie-Luise Kohlke in 2008) is used to describe neo-Victorian fiction’s near-obsession with sensational narratives about Victorian sexuality (8, 9).

Davies makes the conscious decision not to use available visual representations of the ‘freaks’ under scrutiny so as to avoid reproducing the objectifying sensationalist and exploitative treatment they received both during their own lives, as exhibits in freak shows and ethnographic displays, and posthumously, as specimens in medical exhibitions. Instead, she focuses her analysis on the textual narratives that constructed their freakish status, contrasting in each chapter selected Victorian constructions of freakery to their neo-Victorian re-visionings. The first chapter therefore looks at the nexus of colonialist, sexist, and racist narratives that constructed Sarah Baartman as ‘the Hottentot Venus’ in the early nineteenth century and that led to her being brought over from South Africa to Europe where she was exhibited as both a freak and an ethnographic curiosity in private and public shows during her life, and dissected and exhibited as a museum specimen upon her death after Cuvier claimed her body for the Muséum d’Histoire Naturelle in Paris. The lack of evidence about her own consent to perform is read as fertile ground for neo-Victorian re-visionings of her life story. In her analysis of two nineteenth-century texts that refer to Baartman, Davies shows that they display an ambivalent attitude to the received notions of difference and otherness, signalling that they are not as stable or inherent as the accepted racist discourse would have it. The analysis of two neo-Victorian novels – Suzan-Lori Parks’s *Venus* (1990) and Barbara Chase-Riboud’s *Hottentot Venus* (2003) – examines the ways in which Baartman is represented, respectively, as a woman *with* agency, and as a ghost looking back at her life, her body’s lifelong and posthumous abuse, and its eventual repatriation to South Africa. Davies deftly shows how neo-Victorian narratives which seek to re-dress the power inequalities by imbuing Victorian ‘freaks’ with agency ‘might inadvertently invoke the more prurient aspects of the freak show, even as [these] appear to be critiqued’ (58).

Related questions about the neo-Victorian author and reader’s prurience are put forward in the following chapter on the ‘original’ Siamese Twins, Chang and Eng Bunker, who settled as slave-owning farmers in America after a successful international career as freak show performers. The analysis focuses on two nineteenth-century depictions of their private lives by Mark Twain, an essay and a short story which displayed an anxiety and fascination with the twins’ intimate lives as (racially other) conjoined men who, married to two sisters, fathered 11 and 10 children, respectively. A similar enthrallment with the conjoined twins’ sexuality and its imagined disruption of social convention is identified in the two autopsy reports written upon the twins’ deaths, and, rather surprisingly, in the twentieth-century re-visioning *Chang and Eng* by Darin Strauss (2000). The novel is thus read as a neo-Victorian freak show in which their intimate lives become a feature performance. Davies contrasts these narratives to Mark Slouka’s *God’s Fool* (2002) which, she argues, turns the gaze on the reader as spectator of conjoined sexuality. Davies points out how Slouka’s novel warns against easy identification with the marginalised, socially rejected twins not because of the otherness of their conjoined bodies, but because of the otherness of their world view characterised by racism, prejudice, and their support for slavery.


The third chapter deals with Victorian and neo-Victorian representations of Anna Swann, a Canadian-born ‘big’ woman whose excessive size was seen as freakish. Davies analyses the construction of Anna’s freakery in the ‘true life story’ pamphlets, published as advertisements for her performance, and demonstrates how these narratives, read against neo-Victorian re-imaginings, show that ‘femininity itself can be constructed as “monstruous” as well’ (119). Stacy Carlson’s fictional re-imagining of Swann as Ana Swift in *Among the Wonderful* (2011) and her decision to cut the protagonist’s life story short is interpreted as an attempt to raise questions about the reader’s collusion with the pressure put on the freak show performer through her constant exposure to the public gaze. Susan Swan’s *The Biggest Woman of the World* (1988) is read as a failed feminist appropriation of Anna’s size. As Davies notes, the feminist potential of the novel is undermined via its implied use of the theory of maternal impression, since Anna’s inability to have children is portrayed as a result of her adultery and sexual transgression. Such

a re-imagining of Swann's life story was protested against by her descendants, reminding the reader of the pitfalls of neo-Victorian bio-fiction and the ethics of re-membering.

The latter issue is further developed in the fourth chapter, which deals with the cultural afterlives of Charles Stratton, a.k.a. Tom Thumb, and his wife Lavinia Warren. They were people of short stature whose life stories, argues Davies, were constructed in their own time as disruptive of the distinction between children and adults, especially with regard to sexuality. Davies shows how the neo-Victorian narratives under scrutiny – Jane Sullivan's *Little People* (2011) and Melanie Benjamin's *The Autobiography of Mrs Tom Thumb* (2011) – successfully suggest that the exploited can become exploiters trapped in the vicious circle of abuse via depictions of the couple's treatment of slaves and orphaned children. However, Davies argues that these neo-Victorian re-memberings still fail to imagine the Strattons as adults and thus rise above the Victorian notions of 'dwarfism'.

The final chapter examines the dual depictions of Joseph Merrick, 'the elephant man', as a victim and a villain, drawing parallels to the Victorian anxieties about disfigurement, monstrosity, sex workers, and gender. Continuing the thread of medical sensationalism introduced in the chapter on Baartman, Davies shows how neo-Victorian depictions of the medical profession get invariably 'associated with monstrous, misogynistic masculinity' (177). Connecting the neo-Victorian depictions of Merrick with those of Jack the Ripper, Davies reads freakery as 'a free-floating signifier in neo-Victorian versions' of Merrick (196), suggesting that the TV show *Ripper Street* (2012-present) offers his most complex re-membering as an individual.

In the book's Afterword, Davies considers neo-Victorianism's tendency to 'enfreak' the respectable, ostensibly normal, Victorians and expose them as the true monsters. She connects it to the conceptualisation of the neo-Victorian freak show as a form that can influence change by returning the gaze of the spectator. Juxtaposing the Victorian freak show's 'true life story' genre and neo-Victorian bio-fiction, Davies stresses the latter's precarious balancing act between empathy and prurient sensationalism. It is this insistence on raising often uncomfortable yet necessary questions about the ethical dimension of neo-Victorianism's engagement with the past – and the Victorian freak show in particular – that makes *Neo-Victorian Freakery* a valuable contribution to the field.

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Birth of an industry: blackface minstrelsy and the rise of American animation,

by Nicholas Sammond, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2015, xv + 382 pp., £21.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-8223-5852-7

The recent DVD/Blu-ray collection *Pioneers of African-American Cinema* (Kino Lorber, 2016) offers a valuable contribution to the history of early live-action film in the United States. The set highlights moments (albeit ones that were often isolated and hard-fought) in which black directors and performers were able to take creative control, and at times even challenge the dominant stereotypes frequently found in Hollywood texts. The possibility of a companion volume containing similar revelations about American animation of the same period is sadly nil.