

***Sideshow USA: Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination.* Rachel Adams. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002. Pp. ix + 289. Price: \$60.00 (cloth); \$19.00 (paper).**

**Reviewed by Barry J. Faulk, Florida State University.**

In *Sideshow U.S.A.*, Rachel Adams makes scholarly forays in fields as diverse as photography, cinema studies, literature and literary criticism, anthropology, and performance studies, but her arguments never lose poise or authority. The result is a rich and varied cultural history of freak shows and their complex role within literary and visual modernity.

Adams begins by detailing the “progress” of issues concerning the abnormal body from the sideshow platform into other media: newspapers, legitimate theater and even the universities participate, with academics honoring the freak show imperative “to determine the nature and extent of the racial freak’s humanity” (17). “Act One” covers the reception of freak show exhibitions in the first third of the twentieth century, a time when “the freak’s absolute Otherness is widely taken for granted” (17) by various cultural arbiters. A chapter entitled “Freaks of Culture” describes the fate of Ota Benga, a Batwa Pygmy from Central Africa displayed in 1906 in the Bronx Zoo alongside Dohong the orangutan, and Ishi, a Yahi Indian from Northern California exhibited as “the last Stone Age man” in the Hearst Museum of Anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley. Throughout Adams argues for the highly mediated, constructed character of the freak concept. This section of the book culminates in a careful yet lively reading of Tod Browning’s 1932 MGM film *Freaks*, understood as “a pivotal text for understanding the varied meanings accorded to the freak as exhibits of human curiosity” (18) at a time when the freak show itself was on the decline. Acts Two and Three of *Sideshow USA* trace the afterimage of the freak show as these exhibitions are taken up—and, Adams implies, assimilated—in visual images produced by a disaffected, alienated intelligentsia (Chapter Five details the celebrated freak images of Diane Arbus) as well as in literary texts such as Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, Katherine Dunn’s 1989 cult novel, *Geek Love*, various fictions by Carson McCullers, and Leslie Fiedler’s cultural criticism. In the last third of the century, intellectuals attempted to recast the category of freak into a resonant image of their personal subjectivity. Here the freak’s marginal status permits the articulation of aesthetic, scholarly, sexual or racial alienation. However, Adams suggests that these attempts to incorporate the Other result in the rejection of difference: if we’re all freaks, that notion has no real content, and little potency. Finally, the book explores the recent return of freak shows in New York, particularly Dick Zigm’s Coney Island Circus Side Show, the Bindlestiff family Circus, and the work of performance artist Jennifer Miller. Here the sideshow act returns with a heady intellectual, reflexive as well as visceral presence; as Adams observes, “interpretation, citation, and critique” are no longer by-products of the exhibition but integrated into the experience (210). At the Bindlestiff family circus, for example, theater memorabilia for sale now includes texts by Baudrillard, Foucault and Paul Virilio. Gone, for the most part, are images which celebrate absolute racial and gender difference; these freak shows are intended for a subculture eager to learn properly ironic, campy modes of spectatorship. The classic freak show promised its customers cultural education as well as entertainment; the modern sideshow now makes good on this promise with a postmodern pedagogy. The freak show characteristic of the last third of the twentieth century hails spectators that have come to the exhibit to reflect on the oddness they harbor *within*. In all three Acts, exhibitions and aesthetic formula work to a common purpose: to de-historicize freaks by treating them as events outside history.

Adams’s cultural history does not honor teleology, but it does constitute a trajectory; we move from the sideshow as commercial spectacle for the amusement and education of the masses to the mid and late twentieth-century coding of the freak as metaphor for gender/racial/ethnic

194 displacement that paradoxically has become the norm. She positions herself as fan and researcher of the contemporary freak show (211), and her personal investment is evident in her epilogue, which analyzes the new reflexive sideshow of the New York scene. But despite her careful and textured contextualization, Adams betrays some nostalgia for the old, unredeemed freak show, when otherness was really—well, Other. She lingers on the opportunities the original freak show provided “for unanticipated exchanges between customers and freaks” in contrast with “media transmitted through mechanical reproduction” (29).

Adams’s nostalgia seems to result from the programmatic skepticism with which she handles treatments of physical difference within aesthetic frames. Carson McCullers’s eagerness to see freaks as signs of racial and sexual alterity; the counter-culture’s attempt to recast the category of freak to include new expressive and political possibilities; Toni Morrison’s nod toward a historical tradition of populist discontent with presentations of racial otherness, expressed by Paul D’s demystification of the “Wild African Savage” in *Beloved*: all fail to capture, in Adams’s view, either the history or expressive power of the freak show. It would seem that aesthetic formulae do not allow for that moment “when freaks talk back, the experts lose their authority, the audience refuses to take their seat” always potential in the turn-of-the-century exhibition (13).

Adams’s esteem for the unpredictable results of reception can lead her to reify performance itself and unduly suspect attempts to aestheticize or mediate encounters with physical abnormality. That said, the scrupulous historicizing that marks “Act One” of the book works against any homogenous portrayal of the American freak show, and frustrates nostalgia for the presence promised by performance. “Act One” fractures the traditional elegiac narrative of the popular in which naïve popular practice is replaced by expert discourse, and carnival turned into bureaucracy. Adams argues compellingly that freak shows needed, indeed produced, the expert who might adjudicate abnormality in the name of, variously, medicine, scientific taxonomy or cultural hierarchy. For this reader, “Act One” of *Sideshow USA*, especially Adams’s chapter detailing turn-of-the-century “freaks of culture,” stands at the core of her book. The stories of Ishi and Ota Benga are more than colorful forays into historical archives. As the controversies over the exhibition of these men rage on in the public sphere, the matter becomes increasingly controlled by the media, and by medical or scientific experts. Adams portrays the controversy surrounding the freak show as a struggle “to gain cultural authority and influence” by “newspapers, showmen, anthropologists, and doctors,” each seeking “to prove their ability to shape collective belief, confirming their own importance as the arbiters of public knowledge” (56).

Like most cultural studies approaches, *Sideshow U.S.A.* loses some coherence when it takes on aesthetic matters. Nonetheless Adams’s scope is impressive, as is her careful historical research. *Sideshow USA* demonstrates that popular amusement served as identity marker and subject matter for both cultural elites and the public in the twentieth century; as such it stands as a signal contribution to the study of popular culture within Modernity.

***Critics of Modernity: The Literature of the Conservative Revolution in Germany, 1890–1933.* Martin Travers. New York: Peter Lang, 2001. Pp. xiv + 256. \$57.95 (cloth).**

**Reviewed by Peter Fritzsche, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign**

In his title, Martin Travers sets up a dramatic opposition between modernity and its critics, but in the book itself he does too little to explore the precise qualities of modernity. He fails to explore the ways in which anguish about the contemporary moment might itself be wholly mod-