

ticular interest is a point to which he returns in several other instances: the frequent incompatibility of the “desiring” black body and the black domestic sphere. As Reid-Pharr points out, the threatening figures of the runaway and the errant spouse recur in early African American writing precisely because they represent an extradomestic longing that easily exceeds the fragile boundaries of blackness. Early African American authors, it seems, were well aware of the black body’s ontological instability; thus, they concerned themselves with the frequently difficult but repeatedly necessary process of normalizing that body, and thereby black subjectivity, through the workings of the black household.

In subsequent chapters, Reid-Pharr provides sophisticated readings of four early African American novels: William Wells Brown’s *Clotel*, Frank Webb’s *The Garies and Their Friends*, Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig*, and Martin Delaney’s *Blake, or the Huts of America*. He draws skillfully on critics and theorists from Frederick Engels to Nancy Armstrong (whose *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, Reid-Pharr provocatively suggests, is “essentially [if powerfully] derivative” of an already existing nineteenth-century critique of domesticity). Perhaps most admirably, Reid-Pharr’s concise, almost terse, epilogue manages not only to point out how the framework he outlines remains central to African American intellectual production but also to make an inquiry, however condensed, into the continued validity of it as discursive strategy, to question, in his words, “what more is to be achieved through this union?” (132).

Reid-Pharr’s tightly executed textual analysis and Cooley’s ambitious “back-to-origins” literary archaeology do not so much complement as offset one another. Still, taken together, these two books complicate our contemporary understanding of how authors on both sides of the color line conceptualized gender and race in the nineteenth-century United States.

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***Sideshow U.S.A.: Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination.* By Rachel Adams. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press. 2001. xi, 289 pp. Cloth, \$60.00; paper, \$19.00.**

***The Showman and the Slave: Race, Death, and Memory in Barnum’s America.* By Benjamin Reiss. Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press. 2001. x, 267 pp. Cloth, \$29.95.**

These distinctive meditations on the complex and contradictory logics of the freak show in U.S. mass culture chart new theoretical territory for their topic. Impelled by the critical interventions of disability studies, much recent work on freak shows is framed within the rhetoric of identity, using the freak’s prodigious physicality to complicate a body politics conventionally—and inadequately, this criticism argues—limned as the nexus of race, gender, and sexuality. In their elaborations of this project, both Adams and Reiss open up lines

of inquiry somewhat occluded by the identitarian critique; their studies bring the national historical backdrop into the foreground and, with it, provocative questions concerning the freak show's relation to the large-scale economic, social, and cultural transformations that structure its history. This line of inquiry directs attention to the crucial matter of how the public display of such spectacularly "other" bodies serves historically to both dramatize the limits of national belonging and project the uncanny specter of their unmaking.

Adams's *Sideshow U.S.A.* provides a compelling counterpoint to Robert Bogdan's *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (1988). Whereas conventional histories of the freak show narrate its decline as the public came to regard it as a form of exploitation rather than entertainment, Adams focuses on the proliferation of its iconography in the culture and the multiplicity of meanings its representations hold. Just as sideshow freaks provided "a stage for playing out many of the century's most charged social and political controversies, such as debates about race and empire, immigration, relations among the sexes, taste, and community standards of decency" (2), images of "freakishness," Adams argues, in visual and performance art, literature, popular culture, and even literary criticism rehearse and reframe long-standing as well as emergent social anxieties for contemporary audiences.

Adams's virtuoso critical performance is playfully organized into three "acts." The first of these locates early signs of the freak show's eventual obsolescence in the public controversies surrounding early-twentieth-century ethnographic exhibits of racial others and director Tod Browning's attempt to translate the freak show onto film. Adams argues that freaks' incursion into other cultural domains brought to a head contentious social debates elided by the sideshow in its traditional form. "Act 2" explores how the freak show recurs midcentury in the elite cultural realms of art photography, literature, and literary criticism. Adams's nuanced and persuasive readings show that while "freak" persists in this period as a symbol of social otherness, the conjunction of the freak body's lability with the inherent instability of the various cultural forms that carry it indicate reconfigurations of spectacle and spectatorship by which the line between deviance and normalcy remains permanently unsettled. "Act 3" turns to contemporary texts—Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) and Katherine Dunn's *Geek Love* (1989)—where references to sideshows emphasize embodied difference, whether figured via race or disability, as a locus for identity and community belonging. This roughly genealogical account culminates with a fitting coda: an analysis of present-day attempts to revive the freak show as an alternative art form and, in some cases, a forum for radical political critique.

Like *Sideshow U.S.A.*, Reiss's book approaches the freak show's cultural politics from a somewhat marginal vantage point, examining the political meanings of race in the antebellum North, and a bizarre and largely overlooked episode in American culture, P. T. Barnum's traveling exhibition of a

disabled, elderly, and infirm ex-slave named Joice Heth, whom Barnum promoted as the 161-year-old former nurse of George Washington. From Barnum's acquisition of Heth in the summer of 1835 to her final "performance"—the highly sensationalized public autopsy of her body in early 1836—these exhibits earned him an immense fortune and even greater fame, effectively launching the showman's legendary career. Although Barnum's was not the first display of human curiosities for public entertainment, his canny manipulation of the media and his intense efforts to craft Heth's iconicity even after her death register how the exhibit might be read as a forerunner to the freak show of the late nineteenth century, as well as the inaugural moment in U.S. mass culture. *The Showman and the Slave* thus links the freak show to the production of national memory in a time of national crisis; Washingtonian legend positioned Heth, the ambiguously "free" slave, as an intermediary between the country's newly mythologized past and its uncertain future.

Reiss clearly shares Adams's interest in depicting freaks as complex historical agents, variously confronting, participating in, and undermining the commodification of their bodies. In his concluding chapter, Reiss attempts to offset the distorted image of Heth recorded in Barnum's and the press's accounts of her life with a posthumous biography culled from a painstakingly assembled and necessarily fragmentary archive. However, *The Showman and the Slave* is centrally concerned with the media spectacle surrounding Heth, whose body was frequently and derogatorily illustrated in the press long before news images were a cultural norm (Heth was variously portrayed as an authentic link to the national past, a racial grotesque, a fraudulent sham, an imposter, a subhuman "freak," and even an automaton), and was an object of immense fascination for the public; this spectacle is resurrected for Reiss's readers in a meticulously annotated survey of regional and national press coverage of the exhibit. Combining incisive media analysis with careful historiography and literary critical readings of the showman's own writings, Reiss's study reveals how Barnum's representation of Heth and its public reception indexed emerging canons of taste and notions of class propriety; conflicting views about the body, sexuality, and gender; as well as anxieties and fantasies about technology and empire.

Reiss forcefully argues that these various glimpses of "Barnum's America" must be understood within the context of shifting social attitudes about race and slavery in the antebellum North. Here, the freak show's imbrication with the history of slavery in the United States—a link to which Adams, in her treatment of scientific and popular displays of racial otherness, alludes—is indisputable, and Heth's story provides a salient marker for the centrality of the freak show to the national culture.

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