

Southern New Hampshire University

Otherness as Entertainment

The Victorian-Era Freak Show and its Legacy in Contemporary Popular Culture

A Capstone Project Submitted to the College of Online and Continuing Education in Partial
Fulfillment of the Master of Arts in History

By

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Abstract

This research seeks to provide a more detailed examination of the fate of the Victorian-era freak show than provided in the historiography. The prominent contention is that once the specific maladies became known, the performers lost their draw as being mysterious and inexplicable. Consequentially, the freaks became human in the eyes of society and our ‘wonder’ was supplanted by sympathy and shame at our subjecting them to such degrading exploitation. The problem addressed in the following thesis is that there is little, if any, historical evidence to support this notion other than the conclusions drawn by a prominent sociologist. On the contrary, there exists ample evidence in the historical record that support three connected conclusions: First, the demise of the freak show cannot be divorced in the timeline from the decline of the circus and there exist numerous causal factors for the decline of both. Second, the public’s appetite for freak shows was based on spectacle and otherness and that that continues today. And the third conclusion is that of all the facets which made up the great railroad circus industry, the only one able to translate to the screen and thereby evolve to meet the requirement of modern mass media entertainment was the freak show. The circus is all but gone. The dime museums have long since faded. The freaks, however, and their varying expressions of *otherness* live on in contemporary popular culture.

Dedication

This effort is dedicated to my wife Melony and my daughter Campbell. Without their support and understanding, I would not have been able to complete this. Additionally, this goes out to all of the reluctant freaks out there... You do you. Let the freak flag fly!

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Introduction

Otherness noun: ɒθ·ər·ness | \ 'ə-thər-nəs \

Definition of *otherness*

1: the quality or state of being other or different

2: something that is other or different¹

For my Capstone Project submission to Southern New Hampshire University's College of Online and Continuing Education in partial fulfillment of the Master of Arts in History, I will be creating an online exhibition with an accompanying thesis tracing the intriguing history of the freak show from its Victorian-era origins to its resurgence in contemporary popular culture. The exhibition can be seen here:

<https://mymuseum.omeka.net/exhibits/show/promoting>

What Phineas Taylor Barnum was the first to capitalize on was society's fascination with the exotic; the mysterious; the inexplicable, and he did so by displaying human curiosities in his American museum and later via his circus career. Barnum enjoyed unparalleled success in these efforts because his exhibitions were legitimately interesting to the general public. In the true spirit of burgeoning capitalism, Barnum was simply filling a demand. The current historiography on the subject reveals a near-uniform consensus that society's fascination with and acceptance of the exhibition of human deformity as a form of entertainment began to dwindle in the late 19th and early 20th centuries; that after advances in medical science gave names to the conditions of the otherwise mysterious freaks, society's fascination turned to sympathy. Disability awareness

¹ Noah Webster, *Merriam-Webster.com*, "Otherness," accessed September 1, 2018, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/otherness>.

and sensitivity toward exploitation turned this once popular form of public entertainment into a taboo activity. Scholars use this cultural turn to mark the end of the freak show by 1950. The intent of this research and exhibition is to demonstrate that not only were other factors at play in the demise of the freak show, but also that society's appetite for otherness found nourishment instead in the culturally-transformative industries of cinema, television, and the internet.²

This project began with a research question that popped up during initial research into the advertising prowess of P.T. Barnum. The notion that the freak show fell out of favor and was pronounced dead by 1950 conflicted with this researcher's personal experience. Not only are there freak shows still running at locations like Coney Island, but there are also television programs, movies, and online freak shows. The first chapter of this thesis is an examination of the subject's historiography. Freaks are performers and their shows were not limited to the circus, so the research will examine not only circus-related literature, but also sideshow literature, relevant pop culture literature, and that written on dime museums. The second chapter of this thesis will lay out the historical lenses used, the types of sources analyzed and from where those sources were derived. Chapter three will discuss the target audience demographics, the needs of the Museum of Popular Culture (MoPOP), the project's pertinence and connections to current and former MoPOP exhibitions, and lastly, the exhibition as a reflection of MoPOP's current mission statement.

² Please note: the use of the term *freak* or *freak show* is being used anachronistically. While P.T. Barnum is universally credited with the development of freak show or sideshow entertainment, he never used the term *freak*, preferring instead to call his performers "human curiosities". The term *freak* or *freak show* was not used until the late 1890s. The term *freak* was considered offensive to some of the performers of the time; performers who considered themselves 'prodigies' instead. In the contemporary realm, the term *freak* or *freak show* is accepted colloquialism, and is a term embraced by most modern-day sideshow performers. For the purposes of consistency only, the term *freak* may be used to describe said performers/artists uniformly across time.

The narrative and analysis will begin with the fourth chapter. Mirroring the online exhibition, chapter four will be divided into three sections chronologically. The first section, *The Origin Story*, is an introduction to the broader subject. This section will address the origins of the freak show, dime museums, and the significant players like P.T. Barnum who elevated it to new heights. Not only will it provide a relevant history of the evolution of the circus from its origins to its ultimate end, but it also will testify to the cultural importance of the circus and dime museums, and the importance of the freak show to those venues. Lastly, section will address how society has legislated against circus entertainment with the passage of anti-theater laws and the colloquially-know *Ugly Laws* to lend support to the notion that the demise of the freak show cannot be divorced from the demise of the venue which hosted them.

The second section, *The Hard Times*, will examine the factors which worked in concert against not only the freak shows, but also the venues which staged their performances. It will examine the factors at play such as the prevalent concerns over exploitation, society's turn toward and desire for family-friendly entertainment, the economic conditions stemming from the Great Depression and two World Wars, the birth of theme and amusement parks, and the advent of cinema, television, and the internet. This section will conclude with an examination of the birth of the *freak* as protagonist in the horror films of early American cinema.

The third and final section, *The Re-birth*, will pick up where section II left off. This section will examine how the freak show was able to evolve to fit into the new industries of film, television, and the internet. The sources selected for this section will provide evidence that the notion of otherness is not limited to outward appearance or disability; that otherness, and the demand for it as a form of entertainment, is ever-present; that it also assumes a cultural role. Shows like Jerry Springer parade extreme social dysfunction in front of a voracious audience

daily, while other reality shows like *My 600lb Life* and *Little People Big World* draw a more direct correlation. Television would again take it to the next level with the airing of FX's *American Horror Story: Freak Show* and AMC's reality television show *Freakshow*. Lastly, there are the contemporaries. This project will include interviews with contemporary freak show performers with such organizations as the *Coney Island Circus Sideshow*, and the traveling troupe *Hellzapoppin'*. Lastly, in cinema we find the cultural turn of having the *freak* portrayed in contemporary superhero films as the protagonist and a closer examination of the vastly-popular *X-Men* franchise which is a direct descendant of the Victorian-era freak show.

Chapters five and six will address the important considerations of budgeting, staffing, recommendations for further research, and a discussion of any ethical concerns or considerations that may have arisen in course of the research. The thesis portion of the capstone project will wrap up with the researcher's concluding statements, followed by the screenshots of the exhibition panel listed in Appendix A, and a complete bibliography.

Chapter 1: Historiography

The history of the circus, as a broad theme in the secondary sources, is not a contested subject. The circus is just one venue that this research examines. The carnival sideshows and dime museums also played host to freaks. Compared to the circus, little is written on the sideshows and dime museums and there does not appear to be disagreements among historians. Most of the discourse surrounding the specific case of the freak show among historians is through survey treatments of circuses and their components and biographical studies of men like P.T. Barnum and an assortment of former promoters and freak show entertainers. Historians appear to be more interested in the social aspects of the freak show in its heyday and have given little regard to the circumstances surrounding its perceived demise, seeming to tacitly accept as true the notion that it was society's edification as the sole reason. Interestingly, this notion is more often expressed in the studies and writings of noteworthy sociologists. Historians for the most part, it appears, have yet to dive into the other contributory factors of economics and burgeoning technologies. For historians writing circus history, their treatment of the freak show stops once the big circuses abandoned the sideshow. They fail to follow the freak show into contemporary relevancy. This historical 'dropping of the ball' represents the largest gap in the historiography. Instead, historians attribute the demise of the freak show to social conditions, they are so unwilling, it seems, to examine the notion further, that virtually every secondary source touching on freaks or freak shows cites Robert Bogdan's book *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* as support; as the final authority.

The number of secondary sources available is significant when looking to expand on our understanding of freak show history and legacy. This research has thus far identified 30 books,

two doctoral dissertations, and 25 journal articles, each lending unique perspectives and varying levels of support; each one relevant to the topic and supportive of this attempt to fill the perceived gap in the historiography. Among the books, are several survey writings that contribute to this research project's general background information and context. Among them are Leroy Ashby's *With Amusement for All: A History of American Popular Culture Since 1830*, Jim Cullen's *The Art of Democracy: A Concise History of Popular Culture in the United States*, Janet Davis's *The Circus Age: Culture & Society Under the Big Top*, Ralph Giordano's *Fun and Games in Twentieth-Century America: A Historical Guide to Leisure*, and Robert Sugarman's *The Many Worlds of Circus*. Additionally, this project will incorporate relevant secondary sources with a narrower scope, many of which come from other academic disciplines, most notably the field of sociology. Among them are Robin Blyn's *The Freak-Garde: Extraordinary Bodies and Revolutionary Art in America*, Michael Chemers's *Staging Stigma: A Critical Examination of the American Freak Show*, Lillian Craton's *The Victorian Freak Show: The Significance of Disability and Physical Differences in 19th-century Fiction*, Leslie Fieldler's *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self*, and Anne Rothe's *Popular Trauma Culture: Selling the Pain of Others in the Mass Media*.

Other sources earmarked for use examine the specific histories of sideshows, freak shows, and dime museums, while others like Susan Currell's *The March of Spare Time: The Problem and Promise of Leisure in the Great Depression* lend support to the argument to include economic factors as a potential player. These sources have been vetted for authority and those whose arguments may contain bias still contribute contextually to the argument. The following are just a few examples of the authoritative sources this research will use to support its argument,

beginning with the aforementioned Robert Bogdan's *Freak Show: Presenting Oddities for Amusement and Profit*.

Robert Bogdan is the Professor Emeritus for Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University where he earned his PhD in 1971. His areas of expertise are in special education, disability studies, sociology of difference and visual sociology. In his work, *Freak Show: Presenting Oddities for Amusement and Profit*, Bogdan seeks to lay out, expose its fraudulent nature, and then analyze each “freak” or “oddity” one by one; detailing just how the exhibitions were faked and the purpose for doing so. He chronicles the history of the freak show up until its (seeming) demise, siring the familiar notion that our sympathy for the abnormalities took place of our morbid fascination. Interestingly, although his work heavily emphasizes social protestation as the primary factor behind the demise of the freakshow, he also furthers the efforts of this research by lending credence to the argument by recognizing that it is true that the freak show is not celebrated in the public arena to the extent it was in its glory century. It would, as Bogdan suggests, be more accurate to say that the freak show simply found a new sphere of operation; a new venue for its “pornography of disability”¹

Janet Davis is an Associate Professor at the University of Texas at Austin and the author of *The Circus Age: Culture & Society Under the Big Top*. Her research interests include U.S. cultural and social history, environmental history, women's history and gender roles, and popular culture. The strength of Davis' *Circus Age* is her ability to frame a clear picture of America in this time of change. Through countless sources, she weaves together a tale of transformation

¹ Robert Bogdan, *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2009), xi.

complete with all the requisite growing pains of a burgeoning nation. This is a valuable perspective for this research. She helps set the tone for just how popular the circus was, and the rightful place filled by the freaks. Davis cites countless secondary sources, including books, papers, and doctoral dissertations from a wide range of academic fields to support this, her intended argument:

The railroad circus was a powerful cultural icon of a new, modern nation-state. This vast, cosmopolitan cultural form was the product of the same economic and social forces that were transforming other areas of American life...Its immensity, pervasiveness, and live immediacy transformed diversity – indeed history - into spectacle, and helped consolidate the nation’s identity as a modern industrial society and world power.²

Jim Cullen is the author of *The Art of Democracy: A Concise History of Popular Culture in the United States*. Cullen is an American popular cultural historian whose other works include *The Civil War in Popular Culture: A Reusable Past*, *Born in the USA: Bruce Springsteen and the American Tradition*, *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea that Shaped a Nation*, and *Sensing the Past: Hollywood Stars and Historical Visions*. Cullen currently chairs the history department at the Ethical Culture Fieldston School in New York City and has also taught at Harvard, Brown, Sarah Lawrence College, and the University of New Hampshire. Cullen takes on a broad subject in this thematic survey of US popular culture. While he does address the major aspects of popular culture like the birth of showbusiness and P.T. Barnum, the impact of technology, and a look at television and beyond, he uses the history and evolution of the novel as a central theme in his argument that “new forms of popular culture are almost always resisted by elites”, but eventually these new cultural forms “often move up the cultural

² Janet M. Davis, *The Circus Age: Culture & Society Under the Big Top* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 10, Adobe PDF eBook.

ladder over time”, adding that “...it seems to me that far too much energy has been expended on moralistic judgments at the expense of an attempt to understand why particular works and forms command the allegiances they do.”³

Susan Currell is a British scholar of American history and the author of the book *The March of Spare Time: The Problem and Promise of Leisure in the Great Depression*. Cullen’s research has centered around American popular culture. Her other books include *American Culture in the 1920s* and *Popular Eugenics: National Efficiency and American Mass Culture in the 1930s*. From 2004 to 2012, Currell was a Senior Lecturer in American Literature at Sussex University. With *The March of Spare Time*, Cullen’s argument is by framed her research question which was, “Why did leisure—both proper and improper—become such an intense object of interest, concern, and surveillance by national policy makers, experts, and intellectuals alike in the 1930s?” Her book sets out to explain how the depression changed the notions of leisure in society, adding that while this should come as no surprise, “the extent to which this happened has never been fully examined”⁴. Her work lends some evidence to the notion that economic conditions may have detrimentally impacted not only the freak show’s success, but also the venue which hosted them. Her work not only examines factors such as the increase in available leisure time due to the depression, but also discusses how other forms of leisure took up that time such as film and television.

Andrea Stulman-Dennett, the author of the book *Weird and Wonderful: The Dime Museum in America*, has been an adjunct professor at the C.W. Post Campus of Long Island

³ Jim Cullen, *The Art of Democracy: A Concise History of Popular Culture in the United States* (Monthly Review Press, 2002), 5.

⁴ Susan Currell, *The March of Spare Time: The Problem and Promise of Leisure in the Great Depression* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010) 19.

University since 1977. Before completing her Ph.D. in performance studies, she was a working actress and trained with The American Conservatory Theatre in San Francisco and attended a one-year program with The Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. Her work provides some needed insights into a subject of pop culture that is under-represented in the historiography. Stulman-Dennett sets out to examine the evolution of the dime museum, which in the late 19th century were enormously popular American leisure spots. While the book examines multiple facets of the topic's history, her audience would be best described as pop culture enthusiasts. Scholars may find some value in this thorough treatment of the subject because little has been written. Academics, however, will take little else from her work because she does not appear to be making a concise argument. In support of this researcher's contentions, the one argument that she does make is pertinent, stating that the dime museum "is a victim of competition from newer amusements".⁵ For no other reason, her survey of the history of the dime museums assists this narrative by spotlighting the freak show in this unique venue, and demonstrating that it was not just the freak show aspect that fell out of favor, but the venue itself.

Having surveyed the extent of the research on the matter, a discussion regarding research methodology will follow. The following section will detail the sources examined in this research in support of the thesis, and describe the methodologies and lenses used in the analysis of those sources.

⁵ Andrea Stulman. Dennett, *Weird and Wonderful: The Dime Museum in America* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), xi.

Chapter 2: Methodology

Simply put, the research conducted will be interpreted primarily with both cultural and social lenses. While the project will examine economic factors ranging from the impact on leisure activities from The Great Depression to the Internet, it will be the cultural and social reactions to these events driving the project's conclusions and interpretation of sources. As an example, this research will be looking at various anti-circus and 'anti-freak' legislation passed throughout the country and will seek to understand these laws in a social and cultural context. The significant presence of sociology professionals contributing to the historiography aside, there is much ado with this topic about the notions of high and low culture and the associative audiences, with popular culture as a class dividing line. In this respect, the social lens becomes as important as the cultural lens. There is also debate as to whether popular culture is a lens in and of itself or merely a category or focus with social/cultural history. John Tosh, in his book *The Pursuit of History: Aims, Methods and New Directions in the Study of History*, discusses the debate stating that "...the assumption that culture is the preserve of an elite has been refuted in the name of popular culture; ...that unlike elite culture, the history of popular culture has not generated a separate academic tradition...".¹ The popular culture lens has a value that is under-appreciated. From that social and cultural perspective, the pop culture lens may be the most relevant in terms of history from below. Popular culture reflects the condition of the masses and often thought of as low-brow culture.

¹ John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History: Aims, Methods and New Directions in the Study of History*, 6th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2015), 206.

This research has thus far turned to several archival collections in its quest for relevant primary sources including, NY Times Historical Database, The Library of Congress Online (LOC), The Connecticut Digital Archive, The Barnum Museum Online Collection, America: History and Life, History Reference Center, and the US History in Context database. On the subjects of circuses, dime museums, side shows, and freak shows, the LOC, Connecticut Digital Archive, and The Barnum Museum all proved to have a good selection of photographs, programs, and posters which will serve two functions: the first is to demonstrate the language used in advertising purposefully accentuated the otherness of the acts; shrouding the performers in mystery through the creation of artificial exotic backstories, one example being a Currier & Ives print promoting the famous “Albino Family” who exhibited themselves at P.T. Barnum’s American Museum. While advertised as an African family with albinism, they were actually Danish.² The second use of these primary sources will be in comparative analysis. These historic photos and promotional materials can be compared to similar contemporary items to illustrate how modern freak shows mirror their predecessors.

These past and present images will be of use as well as part of an online exhibition designed to trace the history of the freakshow and its transition from the circuses, sideshows, and dime museums to the silver screen, television, and the internet. To further illustrate this point, this research will utilize information and images available through the websites of various modern-day freak shows like Coney Island USA’s Sideshows by the Seashore and the traveling circus sideshow Hellzapoppin’.

² Connecticut Digital Archive, "The Wonderful Albino Family, Rudolph Lucsie, Wife, and Child from Madagascar, Barnum's Wonder No. 14," Connecticut Digital Archive, accessed June 01, 2018, <http://collections.ctdigitalarchive.org/islandora/object/60002:3763>.

Another group of potential visual primary sources are the movies and television programming that appear to carry on the freak show tradition. Movies like Tod Browning's 1932 film *Freaks* is an obvious choice, but others may be more so. *Jekyll and Hyde* as a novella and a movie draws some very intriguing parallels. Other relevant examples are successful programs such as *My 600lb Life* and *Little People Big World*, FX's *American Horror Story: Freak Show* and AMC's reality program *Freak Show*, all of which are more direct in their freak-show inspired displays of otherness. Other less obvious modern-day examples of otherness on display can be found in what can be called tabloid talk shows the likes of *The Jerry Springer Show*, *Maury Povich*, *Geraldo*, etc. Our fascination with and celebration of otherness may also be examined through the comic book and superhero franchises. The X-men franchise is a particularly relevant example (See Appendix A – Figure 4). Fiona Pettit, a sociologist dedicated to the study of disability, penned the article "The Legacy of 19th Century Popular Freak Show Discourse in the 21st Century X-Men Films", in which she analyzes common themes in the films such as evolution vs. mutation, mutant experimentation, human or animal, a cure for difference, and lastly, mutant and proud.³

The purpose of this paper is not to discredit current research. It acknowledges the validity of the social concerns and changes and their impact on the popularity of freak shows. This paper seeks instead to add to the narrative that other factors were present. As such this research will also look to validate the prominent argument. For this purpose, the NY Times – Historical Database is an excellent resource, particularly for cultural research in this period of time in

³ Fiona Pettit, "The Legacy of 19th Century Popular Freak Show Discourse in the 21st Century X-Men Films", *Review Of Disability Studies: An International Journal* (January 2014) *SocINDEX with Full Text*, EBSCOhost (accessed July 16, 2017).

American history. Articles found include a 1913 piece titled "The Circus Freak Seen Off Guard as a Human Being" and one from 1923 called "Step Right Up, Folks: See the Soul Beneath the Deformity." While these articles look to reveal the human side of the freak show and foster a sense of pity, primary sources in the form of autobiographies often suggest that the freaks did not want pity. Howard Bone makes this case in his book *Side Show: My Life with Geeks, Freaks & Vagabonds in the Carny Trade*. Having come into the trade just as freak shows were falling out of favor, Bone noted that the industry was "pushing [the freaks] even further to the side and into the shadows, making their way in small companies playing small communities at a fraction of the wage and practically none of the notoriety their ancestors enjoyed."⁴

The primary source base used is typical for the area of research only in the traditional photographs, posters, marketing pieces, and programs. The Freak Show is a visual subject and there is a plethora of image material often included in the secondary literature. While this research may use visuals unique to this project, they remain of the same ilk. This research will not interpret these sources differently but will instead employ them as comparative and illustrative tools. This research concedes the point regarding objectification and exploitation. What will be unique to this research is its use of images, films, television programs, and websites to complete what it deems the unfinished story of the freak shows; to reveal a common thread of otherness.

Project like this are always designed for *someone*. Every public history institution has a target audience. Perhaps that audience has not been reached yet, and the project in question aims

⁴ Howard Bone and Daniel G. Waldron, *Side show: My Life with Geeks, Freaks & Vagabonds in the Carny Trade* (Northville, MI: Sun Dog Press, 2001), 67.

to do just that. In the case of this research and exhibition, The Museum of Pop Culture (MoPOP), has a very distinct audience. The following section will explore MoPOP's audience and needs in greater detail.

Chapter 3: Specialized Audience

Not all museums are the same. That seems obvious enough, but it is an important consideration when designing exhibitions and writing narrative. Knowing your audience also means speaking their language and delivering a product that is meant for their consumption. This determination will inform which items to use and how the narrative should be composed to best connect the visitor to the exhibition. Developing a definitive style of narrative becomes even more important considering that museums have been struggling of late. There has been much lamenting in the trade journals about declining interest, but there is good news. The American Alliance of Museums concluded a study this year that bodes very well for the industry. The published report, *Museums and Public Opinion: Summary of Findings from National Public Opinion Polling*, revealed that “Americans overwhelmingly think museums are important and worth supporting”. The results are very surprising, suggesting that: 97% believe that museums are educational assets for their communities, 89% believe that museums contribute important economic benefits to their community, 96% would think positively of their elected officials taking legislative action to support museums, and 96% want federal funding for museums to be maintained or increased.¹ This serves as an indication that the audience is large. As I began, however, not all museums are the same and not all museum-lovers love all museums.

If this study were done, not with general questions, but instead applied toward specific and differing museums, would the result be the same? Would 96% agree that federal funding

¹ Susie Wilkening, *Museums and Public Opinion: Summary Of Findings From National Public Opinion Polling*, American Alliance of Museums, www.aam-us.org, January 20, 2018, 3, accessed November 27, 2018, <https://www.aam-us.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Museums-Public-Opinion-FINAL.pdf>.

should be provided for both *The Museum of Natural History* as well as *The Museum of Popular Culture*? If so, that would be even more surprising. The point is that because there is a wide range of support for the museum industry, targeting a smaller or specific audience becomes even more important. After all, not all museums appeal to all people. Once it is determined where the museum's appeal is the greatest, the exhibitions should be crafted accordingly. As Eilean Hooper-Greenhill noted in her book *Museums and Their Visitors*, "The words used in museums create approaches to the past, and attitudes to the present: the choice of a theme for an exhibition, and the nature of language used to present it, for example, create and display a particular interpretation of experience"²

Although the targeted audience for this project is specific, the content and historical argument will be of interest to a very broad audience. Taking the targeted audience first: Because this project aligns itself with Seattle's Museum of Pop Culture (MoPOP), the targeted audience is contemporary pop culture enthusiasts. This does not necessarily carry a generational or gender distinction which gives the museum a large net in this regard. From baby-boomers to millennials, popular culture via mass media distribution has impacted their lives. The exhibitions and collections held by pop-culture museums, perhaps more than any other type of museum, can at least temporarily expand the visitor's specious present. An older visitor viewing MoPOP's *MARVEL: Universe of Super Heroes* exhibition, for example, may encounter a specific comic, poster, or action figure which brings him or her back to an earlier time and reconnects a lost memory. As Hooper-Greenhill noted, "Words do more than merely name; words summon up

² Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and Their Visitors* (London: Routledge, 1994), 115, accessed November 22, 2018, <http://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=83154&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

associations, shape perception, indicate value and create desire. Words create power relationships, and sustain inclusions or exclusions”.³ The character, themes, and language consistent with MoPOP’s projects and narratives, are geared heavily toward the younger generation, however. In recognition of this, MoPOP places great value on developing their education outreach, as evidenced in their *2017 Report to Our Community* which brags that MoPOP has provided: 78,686 hours of student and teacher engagement, serving 159,394 students during the course of 2017; 21,167 students and teachers participated in group school visits, and 140 teachers participated in the professional development courses, impacting 5,895 students.⁴

MoPOP is currently featuring two exhibitions that connect organically to this proposed project and research effort. The first, *MARVEL: Universe of Super Heroes*, is an exhibition which “invites guests to journey through Marvel’s 80-year history from inception to modern day with comics, films, artifacts, and interactives”.⁵ The second exhibition, *Scared to Death: The Thrill of Horror Film* “features more than 50 props and costumes from film and television including *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, *Friday the 13th*, *The Walking Dead*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Bride of Frankenstein*, *Dawn of the Dead*, *Hostel*, *Jeepers Creepers*, and *Pet Sematary*”.⁶ The *Re-Birth* section of this thesis will address the connection to MARVEL, the early horror films, and specifically Tod Browning’s 1932 film *Freaks* which, although rejected initially by

³ Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums*, 118.

⁴ The Museum of Pop Culture, *MoPOP: 2017 Report to Our Community*, The Museum of Pop Culture, www.mopop.org, January 10, 2018, 3, accessed October 27, 2018, https://www.mopop.org/media/2190/mopop_2017_annual_report.pdf.

⁵ The Museum of Pop Culture, "MARVEL: Universe of Super Heroes," Museum of Pop Culture, accessed October 03, 2018, <https://www.mopop.org/marvel>.

⁶ The Museum of Pop Culture, "Scared to Death: The Thrill of Horror Film," Museum of Pop Culture, accessed October 03, 2018, <https://www.mopop.org/scaredtodeath>.

the public and largely forgotten until the 1960s, is now considered both a classic horror film and a cult favorite. The targeted audiences of both these exhibitions will be interested in the connections made to the notion of otherness as a significant player in contemporary popular culture and rooted in its Victorian-era origins.

Not only is this proposed exhibition intended to connect to existing ones, but it will also be crafted and presented in a narrative style and manner appealing to its target audience and as a reflection of the mission of MoPOP as stated:

The Museum of Pop Culture is a leading-edge nonprofit museum, dedicated to the ideas and risk-taking that fuel contemporary popular culture. With its roots in rock 'n' roll, MoPOP serves as a gateway museum, reaching multigenerational audiences through our collections, exhibitions, and educational programs, using interactive technologies to engage and empower our visitors. At MoPOP, artists, audiences and ideas converge, bringing understanding, interpretation, and scholarship to the popular culture of our time.⁷

Because the historical argument presented in this project departs from the conclusions drawn by scholars in multiple fields within the topic's historiography, its suitability as a viable effort is supported specifically in the mission statement's final declaration. It does bring a new understanding, interpretation, and scholarship to not only the history of freak shows, but also the overall genre of pop culture. As mentioned earlier, while the targeted audience is pop culture enthusiasts of all ages, general interest will come from a broad assortment of humanities scholars. Historians researching the circus in general, P.T. Barnum, carnivals and sideshows, dime museums, and even researchers writing survey pop culture texts are but a few examples.

⁷ The Museum of Pop Culture, "Statement of Mission," accessed October 3, 2018, <https://www.mopop.org/about-mopop/>.

Sociologists interested in disability, exploitation, otherness, and broadly speaking, the origins and development of the four types of social norms (folkways, mores, taboos, and laws), may also express an interest in the conclusions presented.

The following section is the narrative thesis which will layout the confluence of factors that contributed to the both the rise and fall of the freak shows and the venues which displayed them. After providing a contextual history and the examination of efforts by society to suppress mass entertainments such as the circus and its performers with censoring legislations, it will provide evidence in support of the notion that there are many factors to consider apart of the notion that society lost its taste for the freak show as the sole explanation.

Chapter 4: Historical Topic Research and Project Plan

Link to exhibition: <https://mymuseum.omeka.net/exhibits/show/promoting>

The Origin Story

The origins of the freak show can be traced to the mid-16th century, but the practice began to take form in 17th-century England where people first flocked to witness displays of human deformity. One of the earliest documented acts was that of the Italian-born conjoined twins Lazarus and Joannes Baptista Colloredi (1616 – circa 1646) who entertained the court of Charles I of England in 1642. Freaks remained a cultural curiosity throughout the 18th century and could be found exhibited in taverns, at fairgrounds, and sometimes as featured performers in talent shows on both sides of the Atlantic. It was in the 19th-century when the freak show really took off, assuming its familiar form in large part due to the efforts of England's Tom Norman and America's P.T. Barnum, both showmen who sought to profit from the exhibition of human oddities.

The freak show remained a popular cultural phenomenon and leisure activity from the mid-19th to the mid-20th century in both England and America. Like all performers, the freaks needed a stage. The venue that embraced the notion of the freak show first were the dime museums. Despite being P.T. Barnum most obvious legacy, the circus was not his first and only venture. Barnum was a museum man and an entertainer. His American Museum in New York City would set the standard for dime museums. Of course, as he is most famously known, Barnum would eventually partner with the Ringling Brothers and bring his menagerie and sideshow exhibitions to an ever-widening audience. After diving into a digested history of P.T. Barnum, dime museums, railroad circuses, and the ill-fated performers of the sideshow, a

discussion is in order regarding the earliest relationship between society and the circus. The circus itself, with zero mention of human curiosities, fell subject to decades of societal scorn and as an institution was the victim of targeted legislation for decades prior to its ascension to the height of American popular culture. First, we begin with where it all essentially began, with P.T. Barnum and his American Museum.

P.T. Barnum and His Curiosities

As a P.T. Barnum enthusiast, it pains this researcher to expand so little into the complexities and character of P.T. Barnum. Volumes can and have been written on the subject. For the purposes of this thesis, P.T. Barnum is, of course, significant for many reasons. He is, undoubtedly, the father of the sideshow and the champion of freaks. His contributions to circus industry ought to be an aside to the fact that he arguably created what we now call popular or mass culture. He gave the American people their first taste celebrity in the personage of General Tom Thumb, as portrayed by Charles S. Stratton. To illustrate his fame, Stratton's marriage to fellow little person and Barnum performer Lavinia Warren was Manhattan's social event of the year in 1883. Not only was the wedding party invited to a special reception hosted by President Lincoln at the White House, but over 10,000 people witnessed the nuptials. An equal number of people paid their respects during Stratton's funeral procession. Barnum is considered by many the father of marketing and promotion, the father of the dime museum, and among the most innovative circus impresarios of the time. This thesis, instead, is concerned more with the legacy of his beloved sideshow performers; his 'human curiosities' and their relationship with greater

American society then and now. As such, this research will present a combined survey history of P.T. Barnum and dime museums, followed by a short history of the circus for context.

P.T. Barnum was the circus guy. Sadly, this is what most people know about Barnum. That is to say that this is what remains of him in our national collective memory; our memory that is passed down rather than learned; that is common historical knowledge. The circus, although significant, came later in Barnum's life. Barnum was a museum man by trade. Barnum gave the world, first and foremost, the dime museum. It was within the walls of his American Museum where the freak show was born, and it was a traveling version of Barnum's ill-fated museum that made up the content and character of the sideshow tents.

Barnum launched his career in the mid -1830s with his exhibition of Joice Heth, an elderly enslaved African-American woman. Heth had been exhibited by others with little success, but Barnum brought her to New York, advertised her age as 161, and claimed that she had been nursemaid to the young George Washington. Beginning in 1835 and for seven months thereafter, Barnum exhibited Heth in cities and towns across the northeast, booking venues as small as taverns to much larger concert halls. Barnum marketed Heth in the penny press newspapers which were tabloid-style newspapers catering to urban working-class readers and challenged the cultural authority of more high-brow newspapers. Barnum, early on, knew where his audience was and played to their curiosity. When ticket sales tapered off, Barnum wrote an anonymous letter to a Boston newspaper claiming that Heth was a fake -- that she was actually a machine, made up of whale bone and old leather. Crowds flocked again to see her. Heth died of natural causes in 1836. Although a prominent doctor performed an autopsy and concluded that Heth was no more than 80, Barnum countered that the corpse was a fake and continued to claim that Heth was still alive and performing in Europe and that she would one day return.

Joice Helth launched Barnum's career, giving him the name recognition and money needed to break into the museum business. Barnum purchased Scudder's American Museum in 1841 and added to its stagnant existing collections live acts including freak shows and novelty performers. Three years after purchasing it, Barnum's American Museum boasted having over 30,000 exhibits, featuring Siamese twins, fat boys, bearded ladies, rubber men, legless wonders, and an array of midgets. By the 1850s it was a premier tourist destination; a must see in New York City. By 1864, Barnum's museum housed over 850,000 items. In the twenty-three years that Barnum operated his first American Museum, from 1842 to 1865, he sold more than thirty million tickets. Barnum's acquisition sparked the beginning of both the dime museum phenomenon and era of the freak show. And while many dime museums sprung up to compete, there were none better than Barnum's.⁸

Prior to the arrival of Barnum and the birth of the dime museums, American museums in the early years of the nineteenth century were similar to a European cabinet of wonders, typically made of collections of curiosities, historical artifacts, and natural history specimens. Museums sought to be educational institutions but, being capitalist ventures as well, they evolved to cater to wider audiences. This necessitated the lowering of prices as well as expanding on the content of their collections to appeal to them. In appealing to a mass audience, museums came to incorporate different categories of amusements. By midcentury they had become venues for all sorts of popular entertainments, and their educational agenda virtually had vanished.⁹

⁸ Andrea Stulman. Dennett, *Weird and Wonderful: The Dime Museum in America* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 21-22.

⁹ Katie Stringer, "The Legacy of Dime Museums and the Freakshow: How the Past Impacts the Present," *History News* 68, 2013, 14, accessed September 18, 2018, <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.snhu.edu/stable/43503073>.

As Andrea Stulman Dennett describes it in her book *Weird and Wonderful: The Dime Museum in America*, there was nothing else quite like it, stating that what made the dime museum novel was that for a one-time admission, men, women, and children would be immersed in a vast collection of curiosities including “dioramas, panoramas, georamas, cosmoramas, paintings, relics, freaks, stuffed animals, menageries, waxworks, and theatrical performances ... no previous amusement had ever appealed to such a diversified audience or integrated so many diversions under one roof”. Dennett is not alone in her suggestion that the arrival of the dime museum came at an opportune time in American history. According to Dennett and others, the dime museums served to bridge the gap between popular and elite audiences; to unite high and low culture. “And while supporting the new industrial morality of hard work, temperance, and perseverance”, the dime museum offered a “democratic and ostensibly "educational" form of entertainment in which neither language, literacy, sex, nor the size of one's wallet was an issue” thereby affirming the common person's worth and restored his dignity while perpetuating the dream of a better life”.¹⁰

On the other side of the social equation, the dime museums were able to the elites as well. Those who would have under different circumstances considered the low-brow nature of the content and character of the dime museum, found a place there as well. While much of what the dime museums offered would certainly fall under the definition of idle entertainment, the museum operators were able to diffuse the ire of the elites with the production of temperance and morality plays which fell welcome since the traditional theaters of the day were widely associated with prostitution and crime. Plays such as these, strolling musicians, lecturers, and an

¹⁰ Stulman Dennett, *Weird and Wonderful*, 21-22.

array of freaks displayed on platforms throughout the various curio halls, are examples of how the dime museum incorporated performance to distinguish themselves from traditional museums. It was, of course, the freaks that kept them coming back. The elevated status of the dime museums even served to elevate the status of the freaks themselves.

The freaks typically featured in the earliest dime museums are typically of the same ilk today, with a few notable exceptions. Freaks were not always disabled, in fact natural-born freaks today are the smallest segment of the freak show. One did not need to be shorter or taller than average or thinner or fatter. Chances are, anyone who so desired could find a category to fit into. Typically, there were five available categories of freaks. First were the natural freaks, made up of those born with physical or mental deformities such as with midgets and pinheads respectively. The second category is self-made freaks such as the tattooed performers. The third is made up of novelty artists who were freaks because of their performances. This is a broad group that typically included snake charmers, hypnotists, sword swallowers, and fire eaters among others. The fourth category belongs to exotic curiosities, the non-Western freaks billed as “savages” or “cannibals”, or the “missing link” variation meant to entice and inspire wonder from a society newly exposed to evolutionary theories, notably Barnum’s “What is it?”. The fifth and last category is left for the fake freaks, commonly called “gaffed freaks”, to include Siamese twins that were not attached, armless wonders with arms beneath their shirts, etc.¹¹ Gaffed acts such as these were reserved for lesser dime museums and sideshows unable to attain genuine curiosities.

¹¹ Stulman Dennett, *Weird and Wonderful*, 66-67.

This is not to say the purveyors of freak shows, or the freak show performers themselves were above exaggeration. Barnum knew that the more mysterious and exotic the backstory, the more interested were the customers. Barnum was in the practice of fabricating backstories, particularly with his gaffed freaks. The Albino Family is an example of created otherness. Billing them as Albinos with pink eyes and black parents when in fact they were Dutch. Another example would be the case of Captain Costentenus, Barnum's tattooed man. The fact that he was tattooed from head to toe was a rare enough characteristic to attract an audience, Barnum promoted him as having been tattooed in a Chinese Tartary as punishment for engaging in rebellion against the King, creating another level to the otherness.

Perhaps the greatest example of Barnum's ability to maximize the qualities of otherness as they appealed to his audiences came in the form(s) of his "What is it?" variants which he began displaying in 1840. These exhibits were meant to intrigue the audiences who had become familiar with the theories of evolution and were curious about anything proclaiming to be a missing link. In 1840 Barnum first displayed an orangutan named Mile as the missing link and went through various versions including a Burmese Girl named Krao Farini who worked for Barnum from the late 1880s till her death in 1926. She had "simian-like qualities, including flexible limbs and a hairy body".¹² She performed scantily clad, and after shows audience members were able to reach out and touch her. Barnum's most famous "What is it?", came in the form of Zip. Zip, born in 1842 as William Henry Johnson, was what was known as a pinhead freak. He most likely suffered from microcephaly which usually, but not always, included developmental delays. Zip had a very long career, and at different stages in his career, he was

¹² Laura Grande, "Strange and Bizarre: The History of Freak Shows", *History Magazine* 12, October 2010, 22, *America: History & Life*, EBSCOhost, accessed August 14, 2018.

known as ‘The Monkey Man’ or ‘Man-Monkey’. Barnum was clever to not directly label or assign an identity to his “What is it?” exhibitions. Barnum left the assigning of value to the audience, exaggerating the otherness by ostensibly stating that - *We don't know what it is? Do you?*

Barnum’s American Museum would burn down in 1865, after which Barnum returned to his home in Bridgeport Connecticut. He dabbled in politics, starting in 1865 when he served in the Connecticut legislature. He was later elected Mayor of Bridgeport. His life in politics, away from his original passion, did not endure. In a way, Barnum ran off and joined the circus. He was enticed out of retirement by Dan Costello and William Cameron Coup whom he partnered with to create P.T. Barnum’s Museum, Menagerie and Circus, International Zoological Garden, Polytechnic Institute and Hippodrome and the circus would never be the same.

Before diving into a brief history of the circus, it is important to first examine how the circus and its performers have been viewed in society. Most Americans think of children first when it comes to the circus. In truth, the circus and its performers have been the targets of suppressing legislation since its inception. The following section will discuss both the anti-theater laws which swept up the circuses in their defined terms, and the colloquial Ugly Laws which sought (successfully) to make being disabled in public illegal.

Anti-Circus Laws

Society has a complex relationship with the circus. Although multi-act circuses have been around as a form of leisure and entertainment in America as early as the 1790s, its significance as a national public pastime did not come until the 1820s and 1830s. Despite the growing

popularity of the circus, large segments of society deemed it to be morally lacking. This is due, in part, because the rise in popularity of the circus happens just as the nation was amid a puritanical revival. Leaders of religious, political, and educational groups at the time denounced not just the circus, but also nearly all forms of commercial entertainment. To these leaders, the only pure forms of recreation were educational or religious in nature.¹³ P.T. Barnum commented about this in one of his autobiographical works, *Struggles and Triumphs: Or, Forty Years Recollections of P. T. Barnum*, suggesting that when a circus came to town, the local clergy often discouraged or even forbade the congregation from attending. He tells of a personal experience in 1836 when he was a ticket-seller for Aaron Turner's Traveling Circus Company. While attending a church service in Lenox, Massachusetts, Barnum recalls the preacher mentioning his circus in the sermon, saying that he "denounced our circus and all connected with it as immoral..."¹⁴

Influential religious and educational leaders took up arms against the perceived immorality of commercialized entertainment by lobbying State and local legislators who, throughout the country, enacted laws designed to ameliorate society by banning idle entertainments which neither educate nor edify. The State of New York passed in 1819 *An Act to Suppress Common Showmen, Mountebanks, and Jugglers* which declared that "It shall not be lawful for any person or persons, to exhibit or perform, for gain or profit, any puppet show, wire dance, or any other idle shows, acts or feats, which common showmen, mountebanks or jugglers,

¹³ Foster Rhea Dulles, *America Learns to Play: A History of Popular Recreation, 1607-1940* (New York, 1940), 84-95.

¹⁴ Phineas T. Barnum *Struggles and Triumphs: Or, Forty Years Recollections of P. T. Barnum (illustrated... Edition)* (S.l.: Echo Library, 2015), 81.

usually practice or perform, in any town in this state...”¹⁵ Although rarely prosecuted, the circuses were included as one of the immoral leisure activities. While law enforcement officials may have turned an occasional blind eye, further stipulations of the new law made it so that they would not have to, putting the pressure instead on the citizens. The law goes on to state, “...; nor shall it be lawful for any owner or occupant of any house, out-house, yard or field, to furnish accommodations...” The penalty for violation of the law was that “the person or persons so offending shall forfeit the sum of twenty-five dollars, with costs of suit to be recovered in an action or debt”.¹⁶

New York was not alone in passing anti-circus legislation. A similar law was passed by the Michigan Territorial Legislature in 1827. The law, entitled *AN ACT for the prevention of immoral practices*, was a sweeping piece of legislation nine sections long mitigating issues of moral concern such as public swearing, taking the Lord’s name in vain, adding special prohibitions on the sale of alcohol at or near places of worship, and disturbing people, in any way, who are engaged in worship. Amidst this near-singularly religious piece of legislation, section five states that if any person or persons shall “exhibit any puppet-show, wire-dancing, or tumbling, juggling, or slight [*sic*] of hand...” and get paid to do so, “...[they] shall, for every such offence, pay a fine of not less than ten, nor exceeding twenty dollars at the discretion of the court.”¹⁷

¹⁵ New York (State), *Laws of the State of New York*, Albany, N.Y.: 1819, 240, accessed online October 13, 2018, <https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=0GZZAAAAYAAJ&hl=en&pg=GBS.PA624>

¹⁶ New York (State), *Laws of the State of New York*, 240.

¹⁷ Michigan, *Laws of the Territory of Michigan*, Lansing: W.S. George & Co, 1871, 606.

It seems obvious from the perspective of the 21st century that these laws were designed to ban circuses rather specifically. When the laws were originally drafted, they targeted not the circus, but rather the theater. As mentioned earlier, amusements were against the laws of God, and as far as amusements go, the theater was the worst; the most morally compromising. The theater at that time, however, was not like the theater of today. In the 18th Century, the programs of the circus and the theater were similar. Theaters of the day often featured entertainments between the acts known as *entr'actes*. Traditionally, these acts included rope-dancers, acrobats, displays of magic, etc. The language used in these laws was intentionally broad to catch any variation of such entertainments. Because circuses exhibited these acts and performed pantomimes and melodramas as well, they fell into violation by association. Proponents of such legislations were not limited to the religious. As mentioned earlier, educational leaders were pushing back on such leisure activities as well. The anti-circus laws in Connecticut present a fascinating look at this side of the prohibition.

Connecticut is a unique and fascinating case. Rather than basing the ban of theatrical performances on religious or moral grounds, they rooted their reasoning in their long-time commitment to education. The subject of Connecticut's anti-circus laws received thorough treatment by Stuart Thayer in his 1976 article "The Anti-Circus Laws in Connecticut 1773-1840". Thayer traces Connecticut's passion for education back to 1650 when a law was passed mandating that settlements of families numbering more than fifty construct a schoolhouse. In 1650 that number was changed to thirty-eight but added was the requirement that settlements numbering one-hundred or more families build a grammar school to prepare students for University. The State's focus on education continued, and by the early 19th century Connecticut had become a mainstay for private schools. Educators in Connecticut at the time were of the

mindset that the theater was in no way an educational or productive pursuit or leisure activity. In 1773 a law was passed “suppressing mountebanks because they corrupted manners, promoted idleness and were a detriment to good order and religion”.¹⁸ The term *mountebanks* was used to define any person involved in plays and those who perform tricks such as juggling or other feats of uncommon bodily agility and dexterity. In 1798, the first attempt to repeal the law resulted in the law being re-written. The new act added tumbling, rope-walking or dancing, and puppet shows to the list of banned entertainments. In 1835, a measure written to permit circus performances in Connecticut when approved by both the Superior Court and the town council where the performance was scheduled was rejected by the senate. In 1837, a thousand citizens of Hartford signed a petition requesting that theatrical productions be allowed. This was met by an equal number of supporters for the law to remain in place. The debate was hosted by the Connecticut Observer, concluding with a rejection of the petition and an editorial statement of support for the decision printed in the Observer on February 23, 1826, stating

It may be admitted that in some respects the circus is free from the evils connected with the theatre; while, perhaps, it has new evils of its own. Still, there are, in our view, objections equally applicable to both. The waste of time - the corruption of taste - the temptations held out to the young, to obtain, improperly, the means of attendance - the dissipation of serious reflection - the evils connected with an assembly in such a place - at such a time - and for such an object - the allurements which induce some to be present, whose families must lack the necessities of life, and whose creditors must fail of receiving their just dues - these in our estimation are some of the evils common to the circus and the theatre.¹⁹

¹⁸ Stuart Thayer, "The Anti-Circus Laws in Connecticut, 1773-1840," *Bandwagon* Vol. 20 (2002): 19, accessed September 22, 2018, <http://classic.circushistory.org/Bandwagon/bw-1976Jan.htm>.

¹⁹ Connecticut Observer, “Editorial Statement, February 23, 1826”, quoted in Thayer, *The Anti-Circus Laws*, 19.

Still again, in 1840 another attempt was made. This time it was petitioned that towns should be able to decide for themselves whether or not to permit circuses. This measure was also patently rejected. Connecticut would hold firm on these laws until the time of the Civil War, while other similar ordinances, like those in Massachusetts, Philadelphia, and the earliest examples in New York had all been rescinded by 1793.²⁰

The Ugly Laws: Freaks Caught in the Crossfire

Much like how the circuses were swept up in the anti-theater laws of the 18th and 19th centuries, the sideshow performers, as members of the disabled or disfigured class, were likewise the victims of what are colloquially known as the Ugly Laws which began springing up in the late 1800s. Typically listed as unsightly beggar ordinances, these laws were written to rid all public places of the presence of the poor, the transient, and the deformed or disabled. Depending upon which ordinance you are reading, deformed and disabled can be defined as anything ranging from a limp to a mental disability. Even Civil War amputees, in some instances, were vulnerable to prosecution. These laws reflect a significant shift in society amidst three interconnected social conditions. The first was the influx of new and often poor residents in urban areas. The second: an increased desire of cities to be bastions of American exceptionalism; each a city on the hill with its citizenry made up of self-sufficient and productive examples of American individualism. Lastly, and of most significance, America's elite and educated fell for the allure and false promise of the eugenics movement.

²⁰ Thayer, *The Anti-Circus Laws*, 19.

While considerable space could be dedicated to eugenics and its role and impact on American society, a cursory treatment of the movement is all that is needed for these purposes. The worldwide eugenics movement took hold in America in the 1880s, championed by the intellectual classes. The term is derived from the Ancient Greek for “well born” and was coined by Sir Francis Galton in his book *Inquiries into Human Faculty and Its Development* (1883). A combination of socioeconomics, philosophy, and biology, eugenics was a pseudoscience which, according to Galton was “the science which deals with all influences that improve the inborn qualities of a race; also, with those that develop them to the utmost advantage”²¹ Eugenics encouraged the development of good, proper, or admirable traits through selective breeding. This is, of course, a geneticist’s euphemism for separating the wheat from the chaff. To the scientists in support of eugenics, it served to control the population; to create a perfect society. This dystopian effort sought to cast white, able-bodied men as a national norm. Freaks, as members of the disabled or deformed classes, fell out of this definition of normalcy and became the clearest example of what could happen in America should we abandon the principles of eugenics; should we allow our bloodlines to be contaminated by imperfection.²² Because this movement found its appeal, ironically in hindsight, with the intellectual class, it also found its legislative champions. While some versions of the ugly laws were in already in existence, it was from within this movement that they were re-imagined and more widely implemented.

²¹ Sir Francis Galton, “Eugenics”, as quoted in James C. Fairfield, “The American Dime Museum: Bodily Spectacle and Social Midways in Turn-of-the-Century American Literature and Culture” (PhD diss., University of Kentucky, 2015), 3, accessed September 4, 2018, https://uknowledge.uky.edu/english_etds/50.

²² James C. Fairfield, “The American Dime Museum: Bodily Spectacle and Social Midways in Turn-of-the-Century American Literature and Culture” (PhD diss., University of Kentucky, 2015), 4, accessed September 4, 2018, https://uknowledge.uky.edu/english_etds/50.

The City of San Francisco enacted ugly laws in 1867, well before the influence of the eugenicists, influenced by the aforementioned conditions of urban population growth, the influx of the destitute, and the desire to present itself in the ideal light of exceptionalism by keeping the wretched out of sight and mind. The impact of the eugenics movement was first realized when Chicago passed their ordinance of 1881. The working language of the 1867 San Francisco ordinance was taken almost verbatim in Chicago

Any person who is diseased, maimed, mutilated, or in any way deformed, so as to be an unsightly or disgusting object, or an improper person to be allowed in or on the streets, highways, thoroughfares, or public places in the city, shall not therein or thereon expose himself to public view, under the penalty of a fine of \$1 for each offense. On the conviction of any person for a violation of this section, if it shall seem proper and just, the fine provided for may be suspended, and such person detained at the police station, where he shall be well cared for, until he can be committed to the country poor house.²³

Chicago was not alone in aping San Francisco's efforts to clean up the public spaces. Ordinances began to appear in all corners of the nation. They were enacted in New Orleans in 1879, Denver in 1886, Portland in 1881, and Lincoln, Nebraska in 1889, each containing the same working language. Reno was the last to pass an ugly law in 1905. Chicago made some changes in 1911, making their law stricter and more defined. Los Angeles attempted to pass an Ugly Law as late as 1913. Two other laws merit special attention and commentary because they significantly expand the definition of disability. Pennsylvania's 1891 version of the ugly laws further identified as undesirable those who "exhibit[ed] any physical deformity . . . which [was]

²³ City of Chicago, Egbert Jamieson and Francis Adams, "The Municipal Code of Chicago: Comprising the Laws of Illinois Relating to the City of Chicago and the Ordinances of the City Council" (Chicago, 1881), 377, accessed online, <https://archive.org/details/municipalcodeofc00chicrich/page/377>

produced by artificial means for hire”.²⁴ New York City’s 1895 ban included not only those with physical disabilities, but those with mental impairments as well by including in their definition any person who is idiotic or imbecilic. The ordinances of Pennsylvania and New York City serve to illustrate that society’s concern is not with unsightly beggars or the “ugly”, but rather with legislating normalcy by penalizing otherness.²⁵ With a few exceptions, most of these laws were stricken in the 1960s and 1970s.

The conclusion to be drawn from the impact of the eugenics movement and the formulation of the ugly laws is that a “standard of normalcy in the form of the able-bodied white male was to be enforced; that all bodies were subject to public scrutiny based on a national eugenic standard, which rendered as deviant any bodies that failed to meet that standard”. Therefore, deviances of race, disability, disease, sexuality, or poverty “...threatened the presentation of America as a vibrant, powerful body”.²⁶ Disability, like race had been, was criminalized, its denizens lumped in with other unfortunates such non-whites, thieves, prostitutes, and violent criminals.

A Survey of Circus History

“Wherever the circus came from, it started like this: someone captivated attention by doing what others could not do. This was a display of startling agility: walking on one’s hands. Springing from hands to feet, over and over. Juggling balls, or knives. Bending so far that one’s head jutted under the genitals, with legs wrapped

²⁴ State of Pennsylvania, “Act 276, 1891”, as quoted in Susan M. Schweik, *The Ugly Laws: Disability in Public* (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 294.

²⁵ Susan M. Schweik, *The Ugly Laws: Disability in Public* (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 294.

²⁶ Fairfield, “The American Dime Museum,” 6.

around the neck. In short, making a spectacle of oneself. The body as spectacle is the origin of the circus.”²⁷

- Linda Simon, *The Greatest Shows on Earth: A History of the Circus*

The Early Modern Circus

The classic three-ring circus that we are familiar with today originated in London 1768. Phillip Astley (1742-1814) was a skilled cavalryman, having served with the 15th British Dragoons. After he left the army, Astley opened an open-air equestrian show and riding academy. He performed the equestrian show on a riding ring beneath a wooden structure and included trick riding, acrobatics, a strongman, and even a clown who entertained the crowd by performing a routine on a slack rope as a comedic break in between acts. While his equestrian show seems a mere shadow of the modern circus in its glory days, Astley’s show contained the three basic elements of the circus by featuring acrobatics, performing animals, and a clown in a single ring. Even though Astley created the format, credit for the moniker goes to one of his former riders, Charles Hughes, who founded the Royal Circus in 1792. (Courtesy Boston Museum of Fine Art)

It was not long before this new form of entertainment hit the United States. Like in England, the three elements of the circus were already present, just not combined into a single-admittance show. John Bill Ricketts (1760-1800) was the first to do it in 1793 when he opened an 800-seat riding academy in Philadelphia and gave what is considered America’s first circus performance on April 3rd of that year. Ricketts, once a horseman in Hughes Riding School,

²⁷ Linda Simon, *The Greatest Shows on Earth: A History of the Circus* (London: Reaktion, 2014), 1.

centered his circus around equestrian acts as well. Just as his mentors did, Ricketts also featured acrobats, trick riding, and a clown.

Ricketts would open a second circus in New York in 1797, signaling the beginning of sustained circus growth primarily contained to the Eastern seaboard. From the late 18th century through to the 1820s, over two-dozen small, independent traveling circus-like shows formed. Some strictly presented menageries of exotic animals and some featured only an assortment of acts like equestrian riders, jugglers, and acrobats. While both forms found enthusiastic support on the road, the hybrid versions enjoyed the most support and would be the model for the traveling circuses going forward.²⁸²⁹

The 19th-Century Circus

In 1825 J. Purdy Brown introduced a simple innovation which would change the circus forever. By staging his performances beneath a tent, his traveling shows were no longer confined to permanent buildings and amphitheaters. This practice caught on, allowing the traveling circuses to stay on the road for longer periods of time and perform longer seasons. Additionally, more rural venues could be added, expanding the circuses' footprint. It was Brown's tenting of his show that led directly to the circus "Big Top" becoming the icon of the American circus.

The growing popularity of the circus and the exciting new portable format made it possible for some westward expansion. To facilitate this, the makeup of the traveling circus changed. The smaller circuses abandoned the equestrian-centered pre-tent format, filling out

²⁸ Rodney A. Huey, "An Abbreviated History of The Circus in America," Circusfederation.org, 1, accessed August 09, 2018, http://www.circusfederation.org/uploads/circus_culture/about/america-huey.pdf.

²⁹ Janet M. Davis, *The Circus Age: Culture & Society Under the Big Top* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 15-24, Adobe PDF eBook.

their bill instead with acrobatics, exotic animal displays, juggling and specialty acts. The only real remnant of the original Astley, Hughes, and Ricketts circuses was the clown. Like the iconic Big Top, the clown came to symbolize the unique character of the American circus.³⁰

Three Ring Circus

We come to the critical juncture where P.T. Barnum makes his grand entrance into the circus business. In 1870 former circus clown and owner Dan Castello (1837-1895) partnered with William Cameron Coup (1837-1895) to create the Dan Castello's Circus. Their circus toured the Midwest for a year and enjoyed great success. Castello, desperate to expand his enterprise, enticed P.T. Barnum out of retirement from his museum endeavors because they needed both his financial support as well as his invaluable name recognition. In 1871 Barnum, Castello, and Coup formed P.T. Barnum's Museum, Menagerie and Circus, International Zoological Garden, Polytechnic Institute and Hippodrome.

Barnum must have been stir-crazy after retirement because after agreeing to the deal he proceeded to invest a small fortune into the endeavor, he placed orders for numerous animals for the menagerie and printed hundreds of thousands of copies of his publicity pamphlets *Barnum's Advance Currier*. The show played in Brooklyn for a week in April of 1871 before heading out on a tour of the rest of the State and greater New England. This tour, called P.T. Barnum's Great Traveling Exposition and World's Fair, was an audition of sorts, and Barnum, et al. left everything on stage. In her book *The Greatest Shows on Earth: A History of the Circus*, Linda Simon describes the audience experience, stating that for the price of a single ticket, they were led through a series of tents containing a traveling version of what was contained in his

³⁰ Huey, "An Abbreviated History," 3.

American Museum including, “automata; magicians; extraordinary humans, such as a giant, dwarf, bearded woman and ‘armless wonder’; and various individuals promoted as anthropological specimens”.³¹ At the end of the series of smaller tents, the audience gathered under the big top for clowns, acrobats, and equestrian exhibitions. The tour was such a success that the venue exceeded capacity and people were turned away. The success of the initial tour invigorated the owners who then took measures to expand their enterprise.

Their first action was to add a second ring, thereby doubling the number of exhibitions and drastically increasing seating capacity. Their second action was to put the circus on the rails. Coup’s decision to incorporate the railroad into their circus operation allowed them to play towns in the Midwest. This action would come to define the circus industry.

As Barnum and Coup’s show grew, so did their competition. By the early 1890s seven major circuses were riding America’s rails. None, however, were as significant as James A. Bailey’s (1847-1906) Cooper & Bailey Circus which opened in 1873. After a brief tour which reached the west coast, Bailey took his enterprise overseas where it continued to grow. When Bailey returned to New York City in 1878, his circus became Barnum’s biggest competitor, complete with 400 exotic animals including Columbia, the first elephant born in the United States. Barnum approached Bailey with an offer to buy Columbia for \$100,000. Bailey, being a clever man himself, refused Barnum’s overly-generous offer. Instead, he advertised that he owned an elephant that Barnum would pay \$100,000 for, which significantly increased public interest. Barnum was impressed with Bailey’s strategy and three years later the two would merge their circuses. A third ring was added, making their enterprise the premier circus company in

³¹ Simon, *The Greatest Shows*, 87.

America. They changed the name to Barnum & Bailey's "Greatest Show on Earth" and ushered in the golden age of the circus.

After P.T. Barnum's death in 1890 and James Bailey's in 1906, Bailey's widow sold the entire organization to its rival Ringling Brothers. The circuses remained otherwise unattached, touring separately until 1919 when the Ringling Bros. and Barnum and Bailey Combined Shows made its debut at Madison Square Garden as the Greatest Show on Earth. It is worthy of noting that after the merger, the Ringling's eliminated the freaks from the circus tour until the opening of their 1913 season.

The Golden Age

The golden age of the circus came in the height of the circus's transition to the rails. The circuses during this time were able to bring their productions to small towns throughout the country. Stretching from the 1880s to the outbreak of World War II, there was no grander event than the circus. The arrival of the Barnum & Bailey circus was colloquially known throughout the country as Circus Day and was met with unmatched enthusiasm. As LaVahn G. Hoh and William H. Rough suggest in *Step Right Up!: The Adventure of Circus in America*, the circus coming to town "was every bit as memorable to us as Christmas, the Fourth of July, and our own birthdays ... [going to the circus] during its Golden Age would be comparable today to attending the Super Bowl and the Daytona 500 NASCAR race on the Fourth of July".³² When the circus came to town, businesses closed, schools closed down. The town was inundated with people from the surrounding towns, arriving early to witness the arrival of the train, the unloading of the

³² LaVahn G. Hoh and William H. Rough, *Step Right Up! The Adventure of Circus in America* (White Hall (Va.): Betterway, 1990), 13.

circus train cars, and the parade of animals and performers which typically followed to the delight of throngs of witnesses. The Golden Age of the circus also brought with it the birth of modern marketing and advertising. As discussed earlier, P.T. Barnum is widely considered the father of marketing and promotion. No one knew how to appeal to the base desires of the American public better than Barnum.

Well in advance of the circus's arrival, circus promoters would send advance scouts ahead of the trains. Their job was to hand out the promotional flyers and lobby local business for permission to paste promotional materials, the sight of which to local townsfolk would stir up excitement and anticipation. By 1903 there were almost 100 circuses and menageries traveling coast-to-coast, more than a third of which traveled by rail. Such was the impact of the railroad circus industry on the development of American society and culture that circus-related terminology invaded the American lexicon, contributing such phrases as "rain or shine", "hold your horses", "get the show on the road", and "jump the bandwagon". Additionally, politicians always knew where to meet the public and could be found walking the circus grounds, "grandstanding". Even President Woodrow Wilson, according to a reporter having witness it, announced his intent to run for re-election by "tossing his hat into the ring" during a performance of the Ringling circus.³³³⁴

The arrival of the train, unloading of the animals, and even the setting up was a spectator event. Any historian who has taken a pop-culture course spent time studying the circus and its social, cultural, and political relationship with America and Americans. In her book *The Circus*

³³ Hoh and Rough, *Step Right Up*, 15-25.

³⁴ Davis, *The Circus Age*, 2-18.

Age: Culture & Society Under the Big Top (2002), Janet Davis succinctly illustrates this point when she said

The railroad circus was a powerful cultural icon of a new, modern nation-state. This vast, cosmopolitan cultural form was the product of the same economic and social forces that were transforming other areas of American life...Its immensity, pervasiveness, and live immediacy transformed diversity – indeed history - into spectacle, and helped consolidate the nation's identity as a modern industrial society and world power.³⁵

The Circus Reaches a Turning Point

The end of the first World War and the Wall Street crash of 1929 hurt the circus industry, causing many competitors to fold up their tents so to speak. The Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey circus was essentially the sole survivor of the larger railroad circuses, themselves absorbing such circus enterprises as Hagenbeck-Wallace, Sells-Floto, John Robinson, Al G. Barnes, and Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. While able to sustain themselves for a while, the economic slump forced them too into receivership. They operated at a loss until nephews and brothers John and Henry Ringling North took over the struggling enterprise. Through effective marketing and the addition of more memorable attractions, they were able to revitalize their circus and throughout WWII the Ringling Show was considered a moral booster and was restored temporarily to their former pre-wars glory. After the war, the industry fell again on hard times. In fact, by 1956 the entire circus industry was looking to fail.

Ringling was plagued with internal management issues and lawsuits on top of the economic crisis facing them. They were not alone in their demise, however. 1956 saw three

³⁵ Davis, *The Circus Age*, 10.

major circuses fold: The Clyde Beatty Circus, the King Brothers Circus, and most notably, as announced to the cast and crew on July 16, 1956 in Pittsburgh, their performance that evening would be Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey's last circus performance. As reported in the New York Times, acknowledging the third circus closure in a matter of two months, stated that "an air of tragedy hung over the proceedings...[that] children and their parents gasped, laughed and cheered in the manner of circus crowds from time immemorial"³⁶

Thanks to the investment of concert promoters Erving (1918-1994) and Israel Feld (1911-1972), The Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Barnum and Bailey Circus was reborn less than a year later. The former drug store magnates turned entertainment men, utilized their significant arena contacts from their concert promotion business, engaged in an aggressive advertising campaign, eliminated the sideshow tents, and booked the revamped circus at arenas throughout the country. In 1957 the Ringling Bros. were back on the road, but as a shadow of its former self, the new version suffered by comparison, eking through the 1960s and 70s. The show would undergo various iterations over the coming decades, but the social pressures to eliminate the large animal acts from circus left very little remaining of what once was a spectacle to behold. On May 22, 2016 the Felds financed the final Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey performance, essentially bookmarking what has been the most significant popular culture attraction in American history.

³⁶ AH Raskin, Special to The New York Times, 1956, "The Bid Top Folds Its Tents for Last Time," *New York Times* (1923-Current file), accessed Jul 17, 2018, <http://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.snhu.edu/docview/113779323?accountid=3783>.

For the purposes of the thesis going forward, the fact that the Felds eliminated the sideshow tents and menagerie from their show in 1957 is significant and will be addressed further in the next section. How can it be that the freak show, according to the prevalent historiography, died in the 1950s due to American's diminished appreciation for the display of human curiosities when the evidence, to the contrary, points to economic decisions; that the Feld's entrance into the industry was too little too late; that the circus was dying long before we blamed it all on the *freaks*?

The Hard Times

When examining the sorry fate of the freak show; the curiosities; the performers; the artists; the human beings, falling back on the notion of 'political correctness' as the most prevalent causal factor is the answer that we like the best. Today, historians are not all that different than a generation ago. From the perspective of a historian researching through a social lens, this conclusion is well-supported in the secondary literature. We lost interest in the freak show, according to sociologists and social historians alike. The advances in science and medicine revealed to us the true maladies of our cherished sideshow performers, thereby supplanting our sense of wonder with a sense of pity. One example would be Feodor Jeftichew who was known as Jo-Jo the Dog-Faced boy to his fans. Thanks to engines of progress, the gaff was up, and it was revealed that Jo-Jo's growling and barking was for affect. He was not ferocious at all. He was just putting on a show. "Hypertrichosis Henry" would likely have sold less tickets.

The point of contention which has come about through this research is the fact that, despite the sincerity of the notion that society's fascination with sideshow performers evolved

into sympathy and that such exploitation became seen as shameless and cruel, it seems impossible to distinguish in the timeline the decline of the sideshow from the decline of the institutions themselves which staged them. Likewise, it is with the rise in popularity of the circus and dime museums that the rise in the elevated celebrity status of its performers happens. Some good questions, simply based on this correlation, would be: Did audiences go to the circus to see the freak show, or did the audiences see the freak show *because* they went to the circus? Similarly, what drew audiences into the dime museums? Were they drawn in by the religious and temperance based theatrical productions and the thousands of artifacts, or by the ‘human curiosities’ and the ethnological congresses? The simplest truth is that the circus and the dime museums were meant to appeal to everyone. You could not pay more for a better seat at the circus and your ticket to the dime museum did not give you special access beyond all others.

Apart from the sociological argument regarding exploitation, there were some other factors and social conditions which led to the decline of dime museums, circuses, and indeed the freak shows. The World Wars and the Depression brought with them wholesale changes in society. From the perspective of popular culture, for instance, the turn of the 20th century brought new entertainments in response to society’s demand for family-friendly activities. The rise of the theme park industry brought wholesome family entertainment and thrill rides. Additionally, and of no small significance, was the birth and growth of the cinema and television industry. All of these factors took their toll on the circus industry. The following section will discuss these modern considerations. First, however, it is important to begin with the fact since its inception, before the introduction of the sideshow, the circus and American society have had a tumultuous relationship. The anti-theater laws of the late 18th and early 19th century, because of their

language and the content of theatrical performances of the day, directly impacted the early American circuses.

“White-knighting”: Disability and Exploitation, Society to the Rescue

Americans had by the turn of the 20th century become edified as to the true nature of the maladies that defined the performers of the sideshows. The result of this nation-wide moral self-correction was that the popularity of the freak show began to dwindle at this time, fading out to near extinction by the 1950s. Robert Bogdan is by far the most widely-cited source on the matter, and the champion of the exploitation narrative. Bogdan, in his book *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit*, argues that a ‘freak’ represents an aspect of the dark side of human experience; a metaphor for separation and marginality. He suggests that for the person performing, ‘freak’ is a state of mind and a set of practices that person employs in their stylized presentation of themselves.³⁷ Bogdan is careful to stipulate that the on-stage performer is distinct from the human beneath the display. Similarly, in her book *Sideshow U.S.A: Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination*, Rachel Adams argues that “freak” is a classification for people who “announce themselves as the antithesis of normality”³⁸ by participating in exhibitions, going on to say that “freakishness” can be defined as a quality, “derived less from particular physical attributes than the spectacle of the extraordinary body swathed in theatrical props.”³⁹ Rather than putting the impetus on the performer, in her book *Extraordinary Bodies:*

³⁷ Robert Bogdan, *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2009), 12.

³⁸ Rachel Adams, *Sideshow U.S.A: Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 9.

³⁹ Adams, *Sideshow*, 6.

Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature, disability historian Rosemarie Garland-Thomson suggests that the road to “enfreakment” comes from the “normal” people with more power who need to validate their own regularity by calling attention to differences in others.⁴⁰ The display of freakishness was not limited to those with physical disabilities, but cognitive ones as well. Many traditional sideshow performers, like the pin-head iterations, often were mentally handicapped which further exacerbated the notion of exploitation; that perhaps they were more easily manipulated.

While it is easy to follow the logical argument being presented by Bogdan, et al. It makes sense that having been exposed to the true nature of the disabilities on display that society would tag those entertainments as taboo. Not only is this a positive reflection on our evolving national character over the period of our modernization, but it also lines up with the historical record which shows that after the Ringlings purchased Barnum & Bailey’s Greatest Show on Earth, their first act was to eliminate the freak show element from the program, an obvious nod to societal pressure. Or was it? Interestingly, considering that medical science brought us to these realizations, Adams among numerous others cite Bogdan and his admission that among the relevant primary sources from the time period, there does not appear to be any evidence that the exhibition of people with cognitive impairments was ever criticized at the time by the medical community or physicians. On the contrary, they often accepted and assisted in the displays, believing them to be educational experiences. They frequently attended performances along with

⁴⁰ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1997), 63.

the general public to examine and comment on the exhibits. They studied the exhibits and wrote articles on them but did not critique the display of people with disabilities for study.⁴¹

In an effort to locate supporting evidence of society's new disdain for the exploitive practices of the circus sideshows and the victimized platform performers of the dime museums, what was found instead was the opposite. Two articles written for the *New York Times* after the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus' 1913 season debut, celebrated the return of the freaks. The March 23, 1913 edition of *The New York Times* had this to say in their article "Elephants, Peanuts and Freaks Again":

There was one feature of the opening that stirred memories of the days when P.T. Barnum himself was living and when he and Bailey were working side by side in the creation of circus history. That feature was the return of the freaks. When Barnum & Bailey's was bought, some five years ago, by the Ringling Brothers the freaks were banished ... They were considered worn out in their drawing powers and well, not quite in keeping with the new ideals of circus elegance.

"But who wants elegance in a circus?" asked the management this year, and the answer was a thunderous "Nobody!" ... And that is why you must go early to the circus this year, for, besides the yaks and the giraffes to be looked at in the cages, there are the freaks...⁴²

A second article, "The Circus Freak Seen Off Guard as a Human Being", printed less than two weeks later, was a massive spread complete with humanizing interviews with the freaks themselves. This article serves to validate the notions of Bogdan and others that society had indeed undergone a transformation. It is evident in this article that the freak show performers

⁴¹ Bogdan, *Freak Show*, 121.

⁴² The New York Times, "Elephants, Peanuts And Freaks Again," *The New York Times* (New York City), March 23, 1913, accessed September 04, 2018, <http://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.snhu.edu/docview/97420585?accountid=3783>.

were now seen in a different light, but also evident is the fact that society had missed them and was happy to have them back, as illustrated here

They thought they could side-track the freaks, the professional freaks, but the public has shown that they are dear to its heart. Five years ago, when Ringling Brothers bought out the Barnum & Bailey Greatest Show on Earth, they did away with the freaks. But this year the same old sideshow aggregation, remembered by those of us who are out of youngsterhood, is all there – the world's smallest woman, the snake charmer, the bearded lady, the elastic skin man, the sword swallower, the tattooed man, the fat woman, the dog-faced boy, with the old familiar lecturer – they are all there.

And that brings us to the point of the story: the freak genuinely enjoys his freakishness. It may be one of the merciful dispensations of providence, but it is none the less an undeniable fact that the lady who has a manly beard upon her chin, the man who has not grown more than knee-high, the lady who weighs many more pounds than ladies normally should, all take a genuine satisfaction in their peculiarities...⁴³

The article goes on to describe what happened when a reporter from *The Sunday Times* went to interview some of the freak show performers while the main show was on, noting that during this time is when people should visit the exhibit. During this time, the freaks were not staged on their platforms or performing stunts for the public. They were engaged with each other in a familiar and friendly way, or as the reporter later commented, that “at this hour one watches the freaks en famille...at this time one sees the freak simply as a human being”⁴⁴

⁴³ The New York Times, "The Circus Freak Seen Off Guard as a Human Being," *The New York Times* (New York City), April 6, 1913, accessed September 04, 2018, <http://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.snhu.edu/docview/97397265?accountid=3783>

⁴⁴ The New York Times, "The Circus Freak."

These two articles serve to suggest that, indeed, society had changed its perception and attitude toward freaks, but they also suggest that society was not necessarily willing to let them go either. These articles indicate a level of reverence between the audience and the performers of the sideshows. If there was exploitation, it appeared to have been mutually beneficial, despite Bogdan's assertions that by creating a separate cultural category for freak show performers it robs them of their humanity, and as such cautions us not to confuse the person and the performance.⁴⁵ Garland-Thomas suggests that ultimately, "freaks are above all products of perception: they are the consequences of a comparative relationship in which those who control the social discourse and the means of representation recruit the seeming truth of the body to claim the center for themselves and banish others to the margins."⁴⁶

These scholars are correct in their conclusions. Society did in fact attempt to marginalize the disabled during this period in American history, only it was not in the way these historians have described it. Like the anti-theater laws had swept up the circuses in the early 19th century, so did the Ugly Laws which began to appear nationwide at the turn of the century. Whether our collective sympathies were the cause or it was rather our collective disgust is not particularly relevant. There are too many tangible and documentable considerations to ignore. The first of which is the fact that American's at the turn of the century and on after the Wars, were seeking out more family friendly forms of entertainment.

⁴⁵ Bogdan, *Freak Show*, 10.

⁴⁶ Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 63.

Make Room for the Kids!

Society seemed to have loosened up after the Civil War regarding the acceptability of commercialized entertainments, including the circuses. Much of this was to do with the growing urban populations who demanded it. It may have been the forbidden ‘idleness’ of the event that held the most appeal. It was, as Barnum well-knew, above all else about entertainment. The old anti-theater laws which swept the circuses up in their broad definitions became increasingly unenforced. Many circuses took advantage of the increased demand and sought to grow their audiences by advertising their circuses as morally sound. In Mark I. West’s article “A Spectrum of Spectators: Circus Audiences in Nineteenth-Century America”, he cites two newspaper advertisements garnered from those contained in Circus World Museum’s collection in Baraboo, Wisconsin. The first, an 1867 advertisement for Dan Rice’s Great Show, proclaimed the program to be “‘Moral, Instructive, and Entertaining and discarding all of the elements that would in the slightest degree prove offensive to the most sensitive and pious mind’”. The second, quoted below, was an 1875 advertisement for John Robinson’s Great World Exposition

Strictly Moral Circus . . . The Public, and particularly families, are assured that this department is without blemish, and nothing is said or done that can offend the most fastidious taste of a refined or high-toned community, and its chaste and classic performances have received the fullest endorsement of clergymen, Senators, statesmen, and heads of families throughout the Union.⁴⁷

While the circuses were doing their best to combat their reputations regarding content, they were not helping themselves regarding the reputation of their character. Janet Davis’

⁴⁷ John Robinson’s Great World Exposition, “John Robinson’s Great World Exposition -1875 Newspaper Advertisement”, Circus World Museum Library, quoted in Mark I. West, “A Spectrum of Spectators: Circus Audiences in Nineteenth-Century America,” *Journal of Social History* 15, no. 2 (1981): 265, accessed August 19, 2018, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/jsh/15.2.265>.

thorough treatment of what was known as ‘Circus Day’ enlightens readers to the excitement and anticipation of the event. She also illustrates how circus day often fractured community relations. Not all residents and communities were equally enthusiastic. Many local businesses resented the circus when it came to town because townsfolk would spend their money on circus and sideshow attractions instead of on local wares and services. Additionally, the circus brought with it the wrong element, spurring warnings from local newspapers like Little Rock’s *Arkansas Democrat* which cautioned local residents in 1898 with a headline reading “Be Careful Tomorrow: Crooks Will Abound and Stores and Dwellings Should Be Watched”, and this from a Mount Pleasant, Iowa newspaper in 1894

The news begs to inform the people that this is Circus Day, and to warn them that it would be wise to make doors and windows doubly sure. About every show, no matter how well regulated of itself, a horde of bums, thieves and confidence men have been drifting into town until now it is safe to say that fifty are in town looking for a chance to commit some depredation. At the Pork House and stock pens a crowd of them can be seen plotting together. Tonight especially should caution be observed.⁴⁸

Despite the efforts of the circus to present itself as a form of moral and decent entertainment, it faced another problem. At the turn of the century, Americans found themselves with more leisure time and were increasingly interested in activities and commercialized entertainments that were family friendly. The circus found significant competition in the emergent industry of family-friendly amusement parks. The circus at that time was a democratizing event that included men, women and minority races from all classes. But unlike its cousin, the dime museum, which held family appeal, the circus was not considered suitable for children. During the latter decades of the 19th century children did not attend the circus in

⁴⁸ “The Circus is Here,” n.p.n.d., Mount Pleasant, Iowa, 1894, quoted in Davis, *The Circus Age*, 30.

great numbers. According West, it was not the intention of circus owners to attract children at that time. “Circus advertisements from this period,” he goes on to say, “appealed directly to adults and seldom mentioned children”.⁴⁹ It is difficult to quantify the number of children who went to the circus at this time, as West explains.

One of the difficulties in determining the decline of the circus and dime museums in the face of the more family-friendly burgeoning industry of themed amusement parks is that there does not exist any complete records of circus audience data. For the very same reason, it is difficult to assess the makeup of the audiences. West concludes that if one were to attempt an analysis of circus audiences, the researcher would have to draw conclusions based on circus advertisements, newspaper articles, and autobiographic works.⁵⁰

To substantiate these claims, West suggests that his examination of audiences pictured in circus-related photos archived at The Circus World Museum, reveals that it is possible to estimate audience demographics. While it is nearly impossible to locate images of circus audiences inside the tents prior to 1885, and of those on record it is not possible to determine audience makeup, there are numerous photos of circus-day parades and of audiences lined up for or going into the tents. His examination of these photos led him to conclude that “on the average, 80% of the people who were watching circus parades were adults. In some photographs, adults made up 75% of the crowd, while in other photographs they accounted for 85% of the parade viewers”.⁵¹ The significance of this analysis is that people were more likely to bring children to

⁴⁹ Mark I. West, "A Spectrum of Spectators: Circus Audiences in Nineteenth-Century America," *Journal of Social History* 15, no. 2 (1981): 267, accessed August 19, 2018, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/jsh/15.2.265>.

⁵⁰ West, “A Spectrum of Spectators,” 265.

⁵¹ West, “A Spectrum of Spectators,” 267.

the parade than they were to the circus. The parade was a free event. Nineteenth-century Americans had larger families than did those in the 20th century. Paying admittances for seven or eight children was financially unrealistic for most families. West's examination of photos depicting audiences entering the tents reveal that approximately 80% of them were adults. "In some cases," he concludes, "nearly 100% of the circus-goers were adults".⁵²

Aware of the growing trends, the circuses responded by adding a children's car or two to the end of the trains and engaged in charitable acts which helped to solidify the appropriateness of the circus for all members of the family. Barnum always considered himself a friend to children, and believed that is circus offered, as Davis noted "all Americans – especially impressionable children – great moral lessons about courage, discipline, and bodily fortitude. Large railroad showmen frequently sponsored Orphan's Day promotions in which local orphans were able to attend the circus free of charge".⁵³ On April 12, 1894, for instance, over 4,491 children from New York City orphanages were sent to Barnum and Bailey's circus. Other efforts aimed at making the circus appealing to families and children like development and marketing of toys. As far back as 1863, Barnum recognized the appeal of his attractions to children and marketed a General Tom Thumb paper doll set. And, as currently on display at Coney Island USA, the popular 1908 Schoenhut toy Humpty Dumpty Circus hit the market. Additionally, in 1902 the National Biscuit Company introduced the now iconic Barnum's Animals Crackers.

It is reasonable to conclude that the efforts of the circus industry to incorporate children and make the event more family friendly really only bought some time. For a couple of decades

⁵² West, *A Spectrum*, 268.

⁵³ Davis, *The Circus Age*, 35.

before and after the wars, the circus had cleaned up its act and was becoming a child's wildest fantasy. This would not last, however. Economics and technology would soon lead to leisure innovations that circuses and sideshows were powerless to fight.

Economics, Wars, and Innovation

As touched upon earlier, the first World War and the 1929 crash of the stock market had a significant impact on circus industry, seeing numerous enterprises either close or fall into the fold of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey circus. Even with less competition, the remaining major circuses struggled to survive the following decades. Economic conditions as the causal factor aside, society itself was demanding change. Perhaps one caused the other, but the average American was working less hours and therefor had more room for leisure activities. To add to that, society's desire for family-friendly entertainment remained stalwart.

In the fall of 1929, President Hoover put together a group of leading academics and social scientists who drafted a report on the condition of modern America. The *Recent Social Trends in the United States* was published in 1933. As the depression worsened, the social problems addressed in the report took on more seriousness. In his foreword, President Hoover stated, "Since the task assigned to the Committee was to inquire into changing trends, the result is emphasis on elements of instability rather than stability in our social structure" and that it "should serve to help all of us to see where social stresses are occurring and where major efforts should be undertaken to deal with them constructively".⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Wesley C. Mitchell, Jesse Steiner, and President Herbert Hoover, *Recent Social Trends in the United States: Report of the Presidents Research Committee* (New York, 1933), 4, accessed October 1, 2018, [https://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/cool:@field\(DOCID+@lit\(lg71T000\)\)::bibLink=r?ammem/AMALL%3A@field\(NUMBER+@band\(amrlg+lg71\)\)](https://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/cool:@field(DOCID+@lit(lg71T000))::bibLink=r?ammem/AMALL%3A@field(NUMBER+@band(amrlg+lg71)))

In her book *The March of Spare Time: The Problem and Promise of Leisure in the Great Depression*, Susan Currell addresses Hoover's document, stating that "One aspect of the crisis highlighted by *Recent Social Trends* was the "problem of leisure." Despite economic hardship, leisure time had continued to grow, and an increasing share of the national income was spent on recreation".⁵⁵ The authors detailed how commercial amusements such as movie theaters, radio, dance halls, road houses, burlesque, and spectator sports continued to attract large crowds in spite of the Depression. Jesse Steiner, a sociologist assigned to the project wrote a chapter on recreation and leisure time. In it he suggests that as the importance of leisure had grown and working hours had decreased, a new democracy of leisure emerged whereby the mass rank and file now insisted upon the right to participate in diversions that had formerly belonged to the "favored few." The new democracy, according to Steiner, had its negative side in the form of more "unwholesome" wasteful, exploitative, and morally questionable leisure practices that had emerged. Steiner concludes by recommending a new government role that would create more "wholesome" leisure for the American public.⁵⁶ "There can be no doubt of the right of government", says Steiner, "to prevent the sale of unwholesome recreation just as it has the right to prevent the sale of unwholesome food".⁵⁷

Shortly after the end of the second World War, the circuses again fell on hard times seeming unable to compete with other the newer commercial attractions like the rising popularity of theme parks, with special consideration given to Disneyland and its pristine, controlled, family

⁵⁵ Currell, *The March of Spare Time*, 2.

⁵⁶ Currell, *The March of Spare Time*, 4.

⁵⁷ Mitchell, Steiner, and Hoover, *Recent Social Trends*, 941.

atmosphere complete with thrilling rides. The mass-media industries of cinema, radio, and television were taking their share of the audience away from the circuses as well. By the mid 1950's the major circuses were failing, including The Greatest Show on Earth which announced that its final show would be on July 16, 1956. The Feld's purchase of the show put it back on the road, as mentioned earlier, in 1957.

Even though it would never again reach its former glory, the Feld's were able to keep the organization running until its final performance on May 22, 2016. There were certain conditions that had to be met in order to resuscitate the show, even if it meant that the industry would remain on life support. The Feld's eliminated the sideshow from the circus. Considering that the hard times of the previous three decades had decimated the competition, this essentially meant that the *circus*, as a form of entertainment, abandoned the sideshow. The question is why. There are two possible reasons, and both may have played a part.

To get at the first reason, it requires going back to Hoover's report "Recent Social Trends in the United States". The report suggested that it was the responsibility of government to encourage "wholesome activities". While this report was published over 20-years prior, it is not to say that government did not still act accordingly. The federal government, upon completion of the Feld's deal, allowed the new owners of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus to utilize the nation's railways. It is possible that the government made the elimination of the unwholesome sideshows a contingency, or that the Feld's did so independently. There is no evidence to suggest one way or another. The second possible reason is simple economics. The Feld's needed to cut costs to sustain operations. An analysis of the Feld's operation by *Business Week* magazine in 1968, stated that the decision to eliminate the side show resulted in a

“reduction of weekly operating expenses from \$175,000 to \$125,000, which amounted to an annual savings of approximately \$2,300,000 on a 46-week itinerary”⁵⁸

The final, and most significant, contributive factor to the fall of the circus was the advent of cinema, radio, and television. By the end of the 1950s, the number of homes with televisions had increased from about a million in 1949 to 50 million. When it comes to cheap family entertainment, the television is king. The television kept Americans at home more and more as the decades wore on.⁵⁹ Although the sideshows were no longer a part of the circus, they continued as attractions at carnivals, fairs, and as independent traveling shows. They were also detrimentally impacted by the changes taking place with America’s leisure tastes. Specifically, the sideshows felt the greatest impact from the development of thrill rides that came to dominate the carnivals.

Joe Nickell’s *Secrets of the Sideshows* proves an invaluable resource in that it is both autobiographical and a scholarly work. While Nickell’s personal experiences in the sideshow trade offer insight, he also includes relevant discussions with long-time performers and prominent sideshow owners like “The King of the Sideshow”, the late, great Ward Hall who passed away in 2018. In a 2001 interview with Nickell, Hall suggested that the decline of the sideshow was came after the wars; that in prior decades people would arrive early to the circus and often stay later but times changed, and they started to show up generally on time. If they did arrive early, they would rarely visit the sideshow tents for fear of missing out on the good seats

⁵⁸ Business Week, “To the Feld brothers it’s all a Big Circus,” Business Week (April 13, 1968), cited in Rodney A. Huey, “An Abbreviated History,” 5.

⁵⁹ Huey, “An Abbreviated History,” 5.

under the big top. For that reason, according to Hall, “sideshows just don’t work on a circus today”.^{60 61}

Nickell’s conversation with Hall turned to the subject of the sideshow’s decline on the carnival circuit, to which Hall unreservedly blames the big thrill rides, stating that “They were like a vacuum cleaner. They’d just suck the money up off the midway.” Hall further recalls how year after year more and more of the midway space was being used for rides. The rides were also getting better and better by the year, most were easy to set up and take down, and carnival owners are not “getting 40 percent and giving 60 percent to some operator; they’re getting 100 percent,” Hall observes. “So it’s a matter of economics: Why the hell should I give up 400 feet of my valuable space to five or six shows? I can take that same 400 feet and I can put seven rides in there”.⁶²

Bobby Reynolds is a contemporary sideshow legend and owner of sideshowworld.com, a website dedicated to preserving the past and promoting the future of the sideshow. In his interview in 2001 with Nickell, he concurred with Hall and others regarding the impact economics and the big rides had on the sideshows, stating that

Political correctness had absolutely nothing to do with it. It’s all economics. The guys that buy these million-dollar rides need all the room they can get so they can make the payments. All you’ll have out here eventually is very big, noisy rides, fun houses that are not so funny, and somebody hustling you for a teddy bear. And the sideshow will be gone. It’ll be diluted like the rest of our country.⁶³

⁶⁰ Joe Nickell, *Secrets of the Sideshows* (University Press of Kentucky, 2005); 345, accessed July 8, 2016, <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.snhu.edu/stable/j.ctt2jcf40>.

⁶¹ Ward Hall, “Interview with author,” 2001, quoted in Nickell, *Secrets*, 345.

⁶² Hall, “Interview...” included in Nickell, *Secrets*, 345.

⁶³ Bobby Reynolds, “Interview with author,” 2001, quoted in Nickell, *Secrets*, 345.

This notion that political correctness had little to do with the fall of the sideshows is echoed, according to Nickell, by numerous others in the industry. While acknowledging that there were complaints lodged in the 1980s regarding the display of disabled people, and a few confrontations, but none of these had an impact on the decline of the sideshow, at least not as a singular factor.

Of course, coming out of this era America fell into the throws of cinema. The television and movie industry would eventually succeed in keeping Americans at home. There was not a cheaper form of family entertainment available. The characteristics of the circus beneath the *Big Top* were not readily transferable to the screen. The draw of the circus was the spectacle. The screen is not able to capture what made the circus magical. The *freaks*, however, were born for the screen. The screen can make the freak even freakier. Of all of the components of the traditional railroad circus, the only one to survive the evolution of mass popular entertainment was in fact the freak show. Unfortunately, the entrance of the *freak* into cinema was not a good one and did little to assuage the fears and concerns society may have held regarding the freaks.

Tod Browning's *Freaks* Makes Things Worse

Tod Browning's 1932 film *Freaks* may have done more to damage the sideshow industry than any other factor. Browning chose for this film to use actual contemporary sideshow attractions as the stars of the film. Included in the cast were Prince Randian (the Living Torso), Johnny Eck (the Half Boy), and Pip and Zip (the Wild Aztec Children), among others. James C. Fairfield's 2015 dissertation, "The American Dime Museum: Bodily Spectacle and Social Midways in Turn-of-the-Century American Literature and Culture", takes a concentrated look at

the film, the societal reactions to it, and makes note of the fact that, what has happened because of the controversial nature of the film and its negative imagery, is that “by the early 1930s, a shift had begun in the cultural perception of the disabled. The freak had returned to its Ancient Greek roots and become a monster once more”.⁶⁴ In his discussion of early horror films, he recalls for the readers such early films as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* in 1920, *Nosferatu* in 1922, and *Island of Lost Souls* in 1931 as examples of how society was beginning to perceive the freak as monstrous.

When MGM and Browning released *Freaks*, the dark imagery and content further solidified audiences’ fears. As Fairfield aptly describes it, the movie is broken in two parts. The first part is a showcase of the freaks and their abilities, taking the viewer through the acts. The second half gets significantly darker. The freaks learn that the trapeze artist, Cleopatra, had tricked one of their own, a midget named Hans, into marrying her for his money. They learned that she intended to have him killed and thus plotted their revenge. As Fairfield recounts the scene, “we [the viewer] see the freaks each creeping through the darkness and crawling through the mud, knives and other weapons flashing, towards Cleopatra’s tent, where they ultimately turn her and her scheming boyfriend into freaks themselves”.⁶⁵ While the content of the film is disturbing, its universal condemnation and initial box-office failure is itself a curiosity. *Freaks* was not Browning’ first production in which he focused on aberrant bodies. His 1927 film *The Show* took place in a freak show, and his films *London After Midnight* (1927) and *West of Zanzibar* (1928) both feature hideous characters.

⁶⁴ Fairfield, “The American Dime Museum,” 15-16.

⁶⁵ Fairfield, “The American Dime Museum,” 16.

The character Phroso in *West of Zanzibar*, for instance, is rendered paralyzed after being attacked by his wife's lover. He assumes the persona "Dead Legs" and travels the world plotting his revenge. A deleted scene cut from the original montage documenting his travels show Dead Legs working as a human duck in a carnival. In *London After Midnight*, Lon Chaney plays The Man in the Beaver Hat, a pale and freakish character; a stranger to town with sharp teeth, donning a beaver-skin top hat and accompanied by an equally-ashen and emaciated woman in a long, dark gown. *London After Midnight* is considered a lost film, the last remaining copy believed to have been destroyed in MGM's 1965 vault fire. It is considered the first appearance of vampires in American cinema, beginning a trend toward the display of otherness as monstrous. *Freaks* differed from Browning's earlier projects in that with his use of real sideshow freaks he attempts to neutralize the monstrous stigma assigned freaks by medicalizing its character's deformities. Rather than bowing to the norm and inferring genetic inferiority or immorality to the characters, he attempts to humanize them. Critics and the population at large, however, did not see this film as humanizing the freaks. Browning's *Freaks* revealed instead, as Fairfield concludes on the matter, "... that society's views of freakishness and what made someone a freak had shifted ... The film and the vitriol leveled against it suggest that motion pictures had finally supplanted the sideshow and that America's vision of the freak had become far more monstrous".⁶⁶ And that seems to be precisely what happened. One last film reference may be the most significant and interesting of them all: the over 123 film adaptations of Robert Louis Stevenson's 1886 novella *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, including versions in 1920 and 1931.

⁶⁶ Fairfield, "The American Dime Museum," 118-120.

While *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* is typically seen as a treatise on split or multiple personalities, an undergraduate student at the University of Miami, Sami Schalk, posited an alternative interpretation of Robert Louis Stevenson's iconic work that, with the help of her professor Kerry Powell, was published in *Disability Studies Quarterly* in 2008. Her argument, to be discussed in greater detail to follow, in its simplest form is that "What makes Mr. Hyde so frightening to other characters, and perhaps to readers as well, is not inherent evil, but disability itself".⁶⁷ Apart from their success with audiences, the films themselves are, for these purposes, irrelevant. Their content and character, as a reflection of Stevenson's original work, on the other hand, is quite relevant.

Schalk suggests that character reactions and perceptions of Mr. Hyde serve to take away his "personhood" in the mind of the reader. She pulls character reactions from Stevenson's novella to illustrate, like Mr. Enfield's statement, "'It wasn't like a man; it was like some damned Juggernaut'", Mr. Utterson saying that Mr. Hyde "seems hardly human!", and Dr. Lanyon referring to him as a "disgusting curiosity ... [that] there was something abnormal and misbegotten in the very essence of the creature that now faced me — something seizing, surprising and revolting".⁶⁸ She raises the further point that as a result of society's fear of deformity, it is not possible to distinguish which came first, the evil or the disability and as a result, "it is not clear if Hyde is disabled because he is evil or if he is evil because he is disabled". Schalk's treatment of *Jekyll and Hyde* also revealed a passage that merits a longer

⁶⁷ Sami Schalk and Kerry Powell, "What Makes Mr. Hyde So Scary?: Disability as a Result of Evil and Cause of Fear," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 28, no. 4 (2008): from the abstract, accessed November 18, 2018, <http://dx.doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v28i4.145>.

⁶⁸ Schalk and Powell, "What Makes Mr. Hyde So Scary?" 2.

direct quote and finer dissection. The passage reveals the reflections of Jekyll's lawyer, Utterson, following their meeting:

The problem he was thus debating as he walked, was one of a class that is rarely solved. Mr. Hyde was pale and dwarfish, he gave an impression of deformity without any nameable malformation, he had a displeasing smile, he had borne himself to the lawyer with a sort of murderous mixture of timidity and boldness, and he spoke with a husky, whispering and somewhat broken voice; all these were points against him, but not all of these together could explain the hitherto unknown disgust, loathing and fear with which Mr. Utterson regarded him. "There must be something else," said the perplexed gentleman. "There is something more, if I could find a name for it. God bless me, the man seems hardly human! Something troglodytic, shall we say? or can it be the old story of Dr. Fell? or is it the mere radiance of a foul soul that thus transpires through, and transfigures, its clay continent? The last, I think; for, O my poor old Harry Jekyll, if ever I read Satan's signature upon a face, it is on that of your new friend."⁶⁹

Stevenson's initial description, stating the "impression of deformity without any nameable malformation", colloquially put is like saying *something ain't right, but I can't put my finger on it*. Utterson struggles with his own fear and disgust, actively searching for a label for what he witnessed. Stevenson chooses to have his character surrender and accept the uncertainty of the sentiment "Something troglodytic, shall we say?" as his best guess. Considering that Stevenson wrote this in 1886, employing the term 'troglodytic' had contemporary relevance to freak shows. A troglodyte is a cave-dweller; a pre-human; a missing link. Stevenson's Mr. Hyde can be likened, in this context, to the tradition of Barnum's "What is it?", the ultimate reflection of otherness. Perhaps, as a society, it is the undefinable nature of our unease that exacerbates our fear of; our disgust for freaks and their defining disabilities. This idea is further supported with

⁶⁹ Robert Louis Stevenson, *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde and Other Tales*, ed. Roger Luckhurst (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 15-16.

Stevenson's reference to Dr. Fell, a nursery rhyme purportedly written by the English poet Tom Brown in 1680, here in its entirety:

I do not like thee, Doctor Fell,
The reason why - I cannot tell;
But this I know, and know full well,
I do not like thee, Doctor Fell.⁷⁰

The Dr. Fell in question is rather non-freakish in origin, considered a reference to a dean who had once suspended the young Tom Brown but then offered to reverse his decision if Brown were able to translate a certain Latin passage. In a fit of defiance, Brown penned the now famous nursery rhyme. Dr. Fell has since, and presumably because of Stevenson's use, been connected to deviance. For instance, Dr. Fell was the pseudonym for Hannibal Lector, Thomas Harris' famous recurring antagonist; a character who may even eclipse Mr. Hyde as the epitome of incomprehensible evil in America's popular imagination. Dr. John Fell is also the fictional killer's pseudonym in John Sandford's novel *Buried Prey*. Lastly, there is Bernard Ferrell's 1979 play *I Do Not Like Thee, Doctor Fell* in which six people who elect to take part in encounter therapy are manipulated by the doctor (Joe Fell) who cruelly exposes their darkest social and sexual secrets. Many would find the prospect of this scenario as nightmarish as any encounter with Hannibal the Cannibal. It is interesting to note that Stevenson's use of Dr. Fell was meant to express the ambiguity of Utterson's fear and disgust while future writers would come to employ Dr. Fell to elicit those reactions.

In truth, there are many parallels that can be drawn in *Jekyll and Hyde*. It can be seen as a study of personality disorders or as a treatise on the duality of mankind. Likewise, it may also be

⁷⁰ Iona Archibald Opie and Peter Opie, *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 169.

commentary on the duality of society, itself being equal parts good and evil and in a constant state of self-correction. Stevenson leaves plenty of room for interpretation, but without intimate knowledge of Stevenson's reasoning, all interpretations are a matter of conjecture. What we can do is look at society during the time of its initial publication and make inferences based on present social, cultural, economic, and political conditions. Interestingly, Schalk's disability theory has historical backing. Consider that Stevenson first published *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* in 1886. As discussed at length earlier, the late 1800s saw the birth and worldwide spread of eugenics and the resulting ugly laws which made being disabled in public, whether by nature or self-affliction, illegal. We wanted to eliminate the blight of disability from our sight, just as Dr. Jekyll sought the elimination of Mr. Hyde. Disability, as we have learned, is not exclusive to the physical body. It includes cognitive ability as well. Mental illness is, likewise, a disability. Lastly, and as food for thought, one must then wonder who was the freak, Jekyll or Hyde? If you accept the idea of them being independent of each other, then Hyde is clearly the freak and Dr. Jekyll represents societal efforts to suppress him. To see the two as one, however, means that Jekyll is the freak. In fact, Jekyll has to drink a potion to become Hyde, making him a self-made freak. Does this change how we see the character(s)?

Since the turn of the century and the advent of the earliest motion pictures, freaks found a home on the screen. It may be that, of all the aspects of the circus that captured the American imagination, the freak show was the only one able to translate to the screen. The screen could never capture the immensity of the circus. It can only focus on one thing at a time, whereas a live circus audience has their attention constantly diverted by a myriad of spectacles, creating an almost overwhelming atmosphere. On television, for example, a commercial for a restaurant can only tell you how great the food is. Until you experience it for yourself, the impact will be lost

on you. The freak show, on the other hand, was made for the screen. The camera brings the freaks nice and close where every abnormality, defection, or curious feature can be seen in far greater detail than possible if one were viewing amongst the crowd. This can both inspire wonder and awe as well as frighten.

Early American cinema, unfortunately for the freaks but in line with society, elected to portray freaks as monstrous. In addition to the films already mentioned, there are numerous more. There was, for example, James Whale's 1931 film adaptation of Mary Shelley's 1823 *Frankenstein: or, The Modern Prometheus*. An unexpected and ironic twist lies in the fact that, over time, Dr. Frankenstein's monster became known in popular culture as just Frankenstein. Considering that Frankenstein's monster was otherwise harmless, Dr. Frankenstein's twisted motivations become the social aberration as was likely Shelley's intent. In 1925 George Chesebro gave us one of many future werewolf films in his silent movie *Wolfblood: A Tale of the Forest*. Werewolves present a great example of otherness in that the human being has been forever changed into something other than human. Non-human blood courses through the werewolf's veins. The human presents no danger, but we must be wary of the dormant freak. As the film's protagonist Dick Bannister says to the wife of the afflicted, "Don't you understand, Edith – the blood through his brain will change his whole character – his mentality – his desires – his whole life."⁷¹ To complete the triple-play of monstrosity, Tod Browning produced his adaptation of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* in 1931. Critics and trade insiders alike decried Browning's film, referring to it "as a 'freak picture' that 'must be accepted as a curiosity'" and referring to

⁷¹ *Wolfblood: A Tale of the Forest*, dir. George Chesebro (United States: Grapevine Video, 1925), film, January 14, 2018, accessed November 01, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C-WTHmpith4>.

Dracula as a “pallid fiend” and a “Living Hypnotic Corpse”⁷² Like the werewolf, vampires begin as victims. Enfeeblement is thrust upon them, socially and physically, and as a result they become other than human. While Stoker’s *Dracula* reveals the human side of Dracula and his capacity to love, his disability is such that society will never accept him. He will always invoke fear.

It appears that Browning’s *Freaks* taught us that by the 1930s Americans had begun to see freak shows in a different light. To this end, Bogdan, et al. are correct that society changed. The extreme reaction to the film demonstrates that the truly disturbing aspect of the film is not in the monstrous characters or the nefarious plot, but rather that these ‘actors’, unlike their beloved Lon Chaney, were actual freaks. It was simply too real. As Fairfield suggests, Americans may have lined up to watch Prince Randian perform his cigarette trick in sideshows everywhere, but they “recoiled at his doing that during a normal conversation. The difference involves seeing him as a freak, an object for their entertainment and derision, and as a human being with whom, despite his disfigurement, they have many similarities.”⁷³ This period, more so than any other, represents the low point for freak shows.

This is not to say that our demand for otherness in entertainment was gone. We merely, and only temporarily, fictionalized the freak. We took what we love, hate, and fear about the Victorian-era individual freak used it for entertainment. When you look at the earlier horror films discussed above, you see that otherness is still the operative formula. Dracula, Frankenstein (or his monster, take your pick), the werewolf, and Mr. Hyde all represent creatures that are either only part human, or the nature of their disabilities remove all traces of humanity. In each case,

⁷² Fairfield, “The American Dime Museum,” 127.

⁷³ Fairfield, “The American Dime Museum,” 126.

the monsters are left to live in solitude and secret. The vampire only goes out a night when he cannot be seen. The werewolf too is relegated to the night of a full moon. Their survival is contingent on not being seen or discovered. And although they frighten us, they are there for our entertainment. To untangle the convoluted relationship between society and the freak is to try to make sense of the following: The very society which supposedly abhors the exhibition of disability; which believes the performers in the sideshows are being exploited, has laws on the books forbidding public displays of disability (even a noticeable limp) *unless* they are a part of a sideshow.

At least one state, Michigan, had the conviction to draw a solid line by enacting a law in 1931 banning freak shows and sideshows specifically, with no apparent connection to earlier beggar ordinances. Section 347 of the Michigan Penal Code reads: “A physician or other person who exposes or exhibits any human being who is disabled or disfigured, except as used for scientific purposes before members of the medical profession or medical classes, is guilty of a misdemeanor punishable by imprisonment for not more than 90 days or a fine of not more than \$500.00, or both”.⁷⁴

The Aristotelian notion that art imitates life seems apparent in this aspect of American popular culture. The fictionalization of otherness, as in the case of disability as a representation of evil or deviance in villainous roles, reflects our societal fears and apprehensions. Because the horror genre will likely always reflect otherness, this comparative analysis could go on forever. Soon, however, otherness in cinema will find its way into the light. Freaks in villainous forms

⁷⁴ The Michigan Penal Code (Excerpt), *Act 328 of 1931: 750.347 Disabled or disfigured human being; exposure or exhibition; violation as misdemeanor; penalty*; Sec. 347, accessed online October 19, 2018. [http://www.legislature.mi.gov/\(S\(h0pu4hzw3lru4xtpiybgol1j\)\)/mileg.aspx?page=getObject&objectName=mcl-750-347](http://www.legislature.mi.gov/(S(h0pu4hzw3lru4xtpiybgol1j))/mileg.aspx?page=getObject&objectName=mcl-750-347)

will make room in our popular imagination for a new brand of freak. Like their villainous brethren, they too are inhuman. They too must hide from society. They too present a danger to us all. The freaks of yesterday were sub-human. The new freaks are super-human. Rather than being marred with disability, they are endowed with hyper-ability and they are here to save us from ourselves.

The Rebirth: Contemporary Pop Culture and Otherness

This section will examine the evolution of the freak show and how it adapted itself to fill a need in the burgeoning industries of film and television. It will cover the earliest entrants into film and how the freak became the antagonist in horror films. Additionally, it will cover the emergence later of the freak portrayed in film as the protagonist. And lastly, it will discuss the notion of *otherness* expressed in terms of social dysfunction in contrast to traditional physical *otherness*. The overarching conclusion being that people can be *other than us* in manners beyond the physical and we are equally fascinated and disturbed.

The Super Freaks, Super Freaks...They're Super Freaky (No apologies)

As promised, this research will not dive deeply into the analysis of superheroes as cultural representations of otherness. Rather, it is enough to illustrate how these characters and films begin a trend of otherness appearing in the protagonist rather than strictly antagonist roles. Antagonist roles, it should be noted, will almost always express a quality of otherness. The powers of *evil otherness* are beyond the capacity of mere mortal humans to battle which necessitates the employment of *good otherness* to counter it. Peter Parker, on one side, is just a nerdy and isolated orphan still in high school who would be impotent in the face of such danger.

The *other* side of Peter Parker, the freak, is Spider-Man (conceived in 1962). Likewise, and in no particular order, Bruce Wayne is Batman (1939), Tony Stark is Iron Man (1963), Steve Rogers is Captain America (1941), Bruce Banner is the Incredible Hulk (1962), and Alan Scott (later Hal Jordan) is The Green Lantern (1940). Superman's freak side, ironically, comes in his alias, the unimposing human Clark Kent (1938).

The superhero film revolution really begins in 1941 with the release of *The Adventures of Captain Marvell* which was a 12-chapter serial by Republic Pictures. This set the formula in place. There would be an origin story, a secret identity, a costume, and an arch nemesis. Batman was to follow as a film in 1943, Captain America in 1944, and Superman in 1948. There would be a lull in the superhero genre until the late 1970s with the 1978 release of *Superman*. This would kick off another period of market saturation, seeing superheroes not only in film, but also on television with the likes of *The Incredible Hulk* (CBS-1977-1982). Tim Burton would bring *Batman* back to the screen in 1989 and set off numerous renditions which are still being produced today.⁷⁵ The 1990s represents an overall lull in the genre except for DC's continuation of the Batman saga in *Batman returns* (1992), *Batman Forever* (1995), *Batman & Robin* (1997). This period can best be described as the calm before the *Storm*.

The release of *The X-Men* in 2000 kicked off what will likely be considered the Golden Age of superhero films. From 2000 to 2020 (including films in production), there have been over 55 major motion pictures released by Marvel or DC Studios alone (See Fig. 1). So long as our appetite remains, there is no end in sight with potential spin-off films waiting in the wings.

⁷⁵ Don Kaye, "From Avengers to X-Men: A Brief History of Superhero Movies," www.rollingstone.com, accessed November 10, 2018, <https://www.rollingstone.com/movies/movie-news/from-avengers-to-x-men-a-brief-history-of-superhero-movies-74706/>.

During this period, Marvel's *X-Men* franchise released eight films with two more set to release by the end of 2019, *The New Mutants* and *The Dark Phoenix*. The *X-Men* represent the best and most glaring example of the freak show tradition in modern film.

Superhero Films by Decade

1970s -1980s

[Superman](#) (1978), [Superman II](#) (1980), [Superman III](#) (1983), [Supergirl](#) (1984), [Superman IV: The Quest for Peace](#) (1987), [Batman](#) (1989)

1990s

[Batman returns](#) (1992), [Batman Forever](#) (1995), [Batman & Robin](#) (1997)

2000s

[X-Men](#) (2000), [Spider-Man](#) (2002), [X-Men 2](#) (2003), [Hulk](#) (2003), [Spider-Man 2](#) (2004), [Fantastic Four](#) (2005), [Batman Begins](#) (2005), [X-Men: The Last Stand](#) (2006), [Superman Returns](#) (2006), [Spider-Man 3](#) (2007), [Fantastic 4: Rise of the Silver Surfer](#) (2007), [The Dark Knight](#) (2008), [Iron Man](#) (2008), [The Incredible Hulk](#) (2008), [X-Men Origins: Wolverine](#) (2009), [Iron Man 2](#) (2010)

2010s

[Iron Man 2](#) (2010), [Green Lantern](#) (2011), [Thor](#) (2011), [Captain America: The First Avenger](#) (2011), [X-Men: First Class](#) (2011), [The Avengers](#) (2012), [The Dark Knight Rises](#) (2012), [The Amazing Spider-Man](#) (2012), [Iron Man 3](#) (2013), [Thor: The Dark World](#) (2013), [The Wolverine](#) (2013), [Man of Steel](#) (2013), [The Amazing Spider-Man 2](#) (2014), [Captain America: The Winter Soldier](#) (2014), [Guardians of the Galaxy](#) (2014), [X-Men: Days of Future Past](#) (2014), [Ant-Man](#) (2015), [Avengers: Age of Ultron](#) (2015), [Fantastic Four](#) (2015), [Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice](#) (2016), [Captain America: Civil War](#) (2016), [X-Men: Apocalypse](#) (2016), [Suicide Squad](#) (2016), [Logan](#) (2017), [Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2](#) (2017), [Spider-Man: Homecoming](#) (2017), [Wonder Woman](#) (2017), [Thor: Ragnarok](#) (2017), [Justice League](#) (2017), [Black Panther](#) (2018), [Ant-Man and the Wasp](#) (2018), [Avengers: Infinity War](#) (2018), [Aquaman](#) (2018), [Venom](#) (2018), [Dark Phoenix](#) (X-Men 2019), [Captain Marvel](#) (2019), [Spider-Man: Far From Home](#) (2019), [Untitled Avengers Movie](#) (2019), [The New Mutants](#) (X-Men 2019), [Wonder Woman 1984](#) (2020)

Figure 1: Superhero Films Released by Decade

The X-Men are mutants, a subspecies of humans with extraordinary abilities. Unlike other superheroes who have elaborate biographies which reveal the path to their eventual otherness and marginalization, the X-Men represent the born freak, the alpha of the sideshow freak categories. Stan Lee confessed in a 2004 interview for the Television Academy Foundation that he took the “cowardly way out” with the X-men. “I couldn’t have everybody bitten by a

radioactive spider or exposed to a gamma ray explosion” Lee continued, letting the air out of the mystery, “Why don’t I just say they’re mutants. They were born that way. We all know there are mutants in real life. There are frogs with five legs and things like that, so I won’t have to think of as many excuses”. Lee approached his publisher with the idea, wanting to call his new group of heroes *The Mutants*. The name was rejected straight away, the reason being that people would not know what mutants were. Lee was told to find a different name. He thought about it and concluded that, “they have EXTRA powers and are led by a man named Xavier. I’ll just call them the X-men.”⁷⁶

Even though Stan Lee seems to debunk any intentional connection or deeper metaphor, it is not necessarily the initial intent of the artist which resonates with an audience. The artist should however come to understand who their audiences is and what about the film appealed to them. The struggle or conflict central to the *X-Men* franchise is otherness and its place in society.⁷⁷ That sentence is loaded with meaning. In the films, humans and mutants live amongst each other, but struggle to do so harmoniously. There are two factions of mutants: Those who wish to live peacefully with the humans; to protect them; to educate them. These are the *X-Men*, the protagonists. The others, those who in some of the films represent the antagonist, do not wish to placate the fears of society by walking gently amongst them. They wish to reign over them like the Gods of Olympus, present in the lives of humans but impervious to their aggressions. It

⁷⁶ Stan Lee, "Stan Lee," interview by Lisa Terrada, www.televisionacademy.com, accessed November 04, 2018, <https://interviews.televisionacademy.com/interviews/stan-lee#interview-clips>.

⁷⁷ Fiona Pettit, "The Legacy of 19th Century Popular Freak Show Discourse in the 21st Century X-Men Films," *Review Of Disability Studies: An International Journal* 10, no. 1/2 (January 2014) *SocINDEX with Full Text*, EBSCOhost (accessed July 16, 2017), 8-9.

is precisely the ability of mutants of any ilk to do just that, which provides the impetus of fear that is pervasive in *human* society and the central conflict of the films.

If the mutants had an antagonist, apart from humanity in general, it would be Magneto. Magneto, as the name suggests, can control magnetic fields. The first film *The X-Men* was released in 2000 and opens in the Auschwitz Concentration Camp as a young boy is pulled from the arms of his mother. His emotional reaction triggers his mutant gene (his X-gene) and we see him twist and bend the metal gates with his mind. Later, one of the guards would try to force the boy to have another episode by threatening to kill his mother in front of him. The man pulls a gun and tells the boy to move a coin on the desk with his mind and begins counting back from ten. When the boy fails, the man shoots his mother in the back of the head, successfully triggering the mutation. The human has plans for the boy; to use him for his own gain; to exploit him. That boy would become Magneto, arguably the most powerful of all mutants and with the greatest reason to hate and distrust humans.

To counter the nefarious intentions of Magneto is Dr. Charles Xavier, the founder of Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters housed in the X Mansion which also serves as the X-Men's (as a superhero team of sorts) headquarters. The members of the *team* are also instructors, and when times are dire, the students also take to battle. Magneto and Xavier are lifelong friends who engage in existential battle, rarely combatant with each other, throughout the storyline(s). In some cases, Magneto is the antagonist, but often finds himself the reluctant protagonist when he is faced with harming other mutants. This would not always be the case with Magneto, but his internal struggle; his skepticism and reluctance, is ever-present in the films. Even following his noblest of concessions, Magneto always returns to his efforts to recruit mutants to his camp. Magneto believes that humanity will turn on them; that there will be a final battle. Even Dr.

Xavier recognizes this potential, stating flatly in the opening moments of *X2: X-Men United* that “sharing the world has never been humanity’s defining attribute”.⁷⁸ Still, Xavier remains ever-hopeful. Take this exchange between Professor Xavier and Magneto at the end of the first film. Magneto has been imprisoned by the humans in a plastic cell and receives his good friend as a visitor:

Magneto: Does it ever wake you in the middle of the night? The feeling that one day they will pass that foolish law or one just like it, and come for you? And your children?

Prof. Charles Francis Xavier: It does, indeed.

Magneto: What do you do, when you wake up to that?

Prof. Charles Francis Xavier: I feel a great swell of pity for the poor soul who comes to that school... looking for trouble.

Magneto: [*halts the game, sighs*] Why do you come here, Charles?

Prof. Charles Francis Xavier: Why do you ask questions to which you already know the answer?

Magneto: Ah, yes. Your continuing search for hope. [*motions to the guard to take Xavier away*]

Magneto: You know this plastic prison of theirs won't hold me forever. The war is still coming, Charles. And I intend to fight it, by any means necessary.

Prof. Charles Francis Xavier: And I will always be there, old friend.⁷⁹

Another factor at play in the *X-Men* franchise, are the different experiences of different mutants. Some mutants can blend in with society. This is the case with Dr. Xavier and Magneto.

⁷⁸ Pettit, “The Legacy of,” 9.

⁷⁹ *X-Men*, directed by Bryan Singer, (Marvel Studios, 2000), DVD (20th Century Fox, 2006).

Nothing in their physical appearance gives away their mutation. There are others, however, who cannot escape their social disability due to their physical appearance. Because of the extraordinary nature of their traits, those who are unable to conceal their identities are “exploited, ostracized, pitied, feared, and glorified. While they have extraordinary attributes, these features often impair the Mutants and make it difficult for them to participate in ‘normal’ society”⁸⁰ A central character, Mystique, has a childhood connection; a brother/sister relationship with Dr. Xavier. Her body in its natural state is blue and scaly, but because she is a shape shifter, she can remain incognito. She struggles more with the idea that Mutants should be proud and not remain in hiding, a sentiment that Magneto pressures her with by constantly reaffirming her natural beauty.

Despite the differences that split the mutant camps, they share a common enemy. All mutants face the extinction of their *kind* at the hands of the humans, or worse yet to become weaponized by the humans; their abilities exploited. Such is the case with Wolverine, the character that garners the largest fan base, already with three spin-offs: X-Men Origins: Wolverine (2009), The Wolverine (2013), and Logan (2017). Wolverine’s natural mutation allows him to heal rapidly from any wound. Additionally, he had bone-like claws that extended and retracted from between knuckles. After his capture by a rogue U.S. Military officer named Striker, Wolverine is further weaponized by the replacement of his bones with the world’s strongest (fictional) metal, Adamantium. His memory erased, it become the quest of Wolverine to find and confront his creator. The others remain at risk throughout the films as the humans

⁸⁰ Pettit, “The Legacy of,” 9.

attempt everything from forcing all mutants to register with the government, to developing a vaccine which promised to eliminate the mutant gene permanently.

A final connection that exists between the *X-Men* franchise and the Victorian-era freak, is the incorporation of evolution into the narrative. Number one, Dr. Xavier did his doctoral work in evolutionary theory, specifically gene mutation. Second, as noted by Pettit, the first film begins, and the second film ends with the same speech regarding the necessity of mutation for human survival: “Mutation. It is the key to our evolution. It has enabled us to evolve from a single-celled organism into the dominant species on the planet. This process is slow, normally taking thousands and thousands of years, but every few hundred millennia evolution leaps forward”⁸¹ This brings us back to the earliest examples of curiosities on display in the Dime Museums which used theories of evolution to inspire curiosity; to have various iterations of the “What-is-it”, missing link to manipulate the popular understanding of the emerging science. Pettit argues that the “*X-Men* films also rely on viewers’ knowledge of evolution to understand the formation of mutants”.⁸²

The largest takeaway from these films is that the conflicts presented are societal and existential. There is no archnemesis or villain. Where there is conflict, there is only temporary resolution. If the X-Men are not fighting for their present state of existence alongside humans, they are battling each other to determine how they (not the humans) will shape the future. They are mutant and proud. Like those who legislated the Ugly Laws which marginalized people with disabilities, the Mutants have the control. They are Gods among men. It is ultimately their

⁸¹ *X-Men*, as quoted in Pettit, “The Legacy of,” 11.

⁸² Pettit, “The Legacy of,” 11

decision whether to be benevolent. Therein lies the struggle and conflict. Are the humans deserving of benevolence? Before you say yes, you may want to revisit the daytime talk shows which took hold in the mid-1990s.

Tabloid Talk Shows: Otherness as Expressed in Extreme Social Dysfunction

This research is not the first to draw the connection between the freak show and contemporary talk shows and reality-television programming. Some connections are simply too obvious to ignore. In many ways the producers of these genres of television programming have drawn the same ire and criticism from elements of society as did the proprietors of freak shows. In some instances, the comparisons are direct and undeniable, the most obvious being AMC's *Freakshow* featuring the day to day operations of the Venice Beach Freakshow. While it is the exploitation of physical otherness taking place once again in this case, these genres have also served to broaden the pop-cultural definition of 'otherness' with their displays of extreme social and cultural dysfunction. "*How can a person look like that? Is that even real?*" has expanded to include "*How can a person act like that? This can't be real, can it?*" In either case, we cannot help but want to see for ourselves.

Like the sideshow performers, not all physical differences are natural. There are freaks with real physical anomalies just as there are gaffed freaks. With talk show guests, as well, there are real circumstances being presented just as there are gaffed circumstances. Ought there be discernment applied? Should there be a line of decency dividing the two? Are *Oprah* episodes classy and edifying while *Jerry Springer* delivers the trash? The mid-1990s saw the emergence of numerous entrants into the talk show industry which spurred intense competition for ratings and survival. As a result, the demarcation line between trashy and classy became clearer. Those

falling under the trashy category began to book the most outrageous guests and promote the most shocking scenarios.

In her article "Daytime Talk Shows: Ethics and Ordinary People on Television", Linda Grindstaff states that these shows began making money by "exhibiting "real" people who, whether "naturally" or through artful orchestration and design, challenged the boundary separating normality from deviance", going on to say that both freak shows and contemporary talk shows are similar in that their exhibitions were never a "straightforward presentation of their "difference"; rather, "difference" was carefully constructed and narrativized to enhance its spectacular or exotic effect".⁸³ Grindstaff includes in support of this argument the words of former New York Times reporter and critic, Walter Goodman, who said in 1955, "[Talk shows] are freak shows, with exhibition of dysfunction in many forms, run by shameless hucksters who are never more disgusting than when they are pretending to sympathize with the poor creatures they are displaying to a studio audience".⁸⁴ What then distinguishes the shameless huckster from the others? The answer depends upon what society considers exploitive, or at least distasteful exploitation. *Springer* is near-universally condemned in this regard. *Oprah*, among others, escape this criticism perhaps because their exploitive techniques are better disguised. The examination of two specific shows, one from *Jerry Springer* and another from *Geraldo* demonstrate that exploitation can be both obvious and disguised.

The first example is from *The Jerry Springer Show* which aired the episode "Cha-Cha Cheating" in 2010. The episode features a little person who has appeared on the show to reveal

⁸³ Linda Grindstaff, "Daytime Talk Shows: Ethics and Ordinary People on Television," in *Image Ethics In The Digital Age*, 131, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), accessed September 18, 2018, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctt1rrdb2z.9>

⁸⁴ Walter Goodman, *New York Times*, 1995, as quoted in Grindstaff, *Daytime Talk Shows*, 131.

to her best friend that she had an affair with her husband (both also little people). After confessing her sins during the stage interview, she and Jerry take a break and dance the “cha-cha” together before bringing out the “unsuspecting” friend and husband. To the glee of the studio audience, a completely organic and unscripted physical altercation erupted on stage. By all accounts, it would appear that this is a gaffed performance. It seems far too visual a feast to have been otherwise. Nonetheless, audiences find it entertaining and have come to expect such pageantry from *Springer*. A clip from the episode, linked to the exhibition, can be seen here: <https://mymuseum.omeka.net/exhibits/show/promoting/re-birth>.

The comparative example is from the *Geraldo Rivera Show* which aired in 1991. In January of that year, a police officer named David Lunsford was killed by three men during a traffic stop. This case was the first time an in-vehicle recording device captured a murder live. When fellow officers arrived at the scene, the equipment was still recording. All three men were arrested and sentenced for the crime. Lunsford’s widow later appeared on *Geraldo*. During the interview, the producers replayed the recording of her late husband’s murder. Because his widow had not seen the footage herself, the producers ran the video with her face inset so that the audience could see her reaction to it.⁸⁵ While *Geraldo* is sensationalistic and not without controversy, is the show’s exploitation of Lunsford’s widow at all different than the parade of traumatic true-life stories presented on more reputable shows like *Oprah*? Do the solemn tone of the episode, the reserved and sympathetic audience, and the reputability of the host lessen its exploitive nature, or do they only frame exploitation in a more palatable light? It is doubtful,

⁸⁵ Mikita Brottman and David Brottman, "Return of the Freakshow: Carnival (De)Formations in Contemporary Culture," *Studies in Popular Culture* 18, no. 2 (1996): 101, accessed September 19, 2018, <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.snhu.edu/stable/23413694>.

however, that Oprah Winfrey will ever carry the “shameless huckster” moniker that Goodman indirectly attributed to Jerry Springer and those in his mold. Regardless, the pain of others is being presented as entertainment for profit in both high and low forms.

As audience members we have only the solemn oath of the television execs and producers that these shows might as well be called documentaries. We are to believe that the subjects of these ‘documentaries’ are being candidly captured in real life situations and conflicts; that they receive no encouragement to elevate disagreements, nor any guidance as how to react to a perceived offense. In Barnum fashion, they believe that it does not matter if it is true, so long as people are entertained. If people tune in because they believe what they are watching, great. If they tune in because they ‘can’t believe anyone actually believes this stuff’ and cannot escape the morbid fascination, better still. They only ask that we tune in. This is particularly true of the tabloid television shows like *The Jerry Springer Show*. For this reason, Jerry Springer, may the closest we have come to modern P.T. Barnum.

Barnum’s human curiosities were exhibitions of otherness which relied upon either the physical form of otherness, or in the performance of a freakish act or display of talent that baffles the audience, leaving them to wonder how what they just saw was even possible. *Jerry Springer* does not need to use *little people* to express otherness. In the case of “Cha-Cha Cheating”, it just happened (as if serendipitously) that this love triangle involved little people. In truth, rarely does *Springer*, or other shows like it, use traditional sideshow performers. Instead, these shows display otherness in the form of extreme social dysfunction. Episode after episode is filled with confessions of infidelity, betrayal, and situations bordering on the incestuous. Like with the freak show audiences discussed earlier, watching performances like these allow audiences to reflect upon their own comparative normalcy.

Tabloid talk shows such as these are just one example of otherness expressed in contemporary popular culture. As mentioned earlier, reality television programs often cater to the same curiosity that drove audiences into the dime museums and sideshow tents. While we are no longer mystified by little people, we are still interested. The Learning Channel's *Little People, Big World* is a reality show that claims to document the day-to-day life of a family of little people (two children of standard size). *My 600lb Life* is another show which draws that same curiosity but channels the support of the viewers who pull for the individuals in the efforts to lose the weight. These are both extremely successful, long-running, programs. These two shows demonstrate a level of otherness that the average American cannot personally identify with. And like the tabloid talk shows, they share with the traditional freak show the ability to appeal to the human impulses of curiosity and voyeurism.⁸⁶

Despite drawing the ire of television critics, shows like *The Jerry Springer Show* persist. When it looked like *Springer* was finally going to be cancelled, Richard Roper wrote "Good Riddance to 'Jerry Springer,' The Bottom of the Talk-Show Barrel" for the *Chicago Sun Times* in June 2018. The article begins with, "After 27 years and nearly 4,000 tawdry, shameless, idiotic episodes, it appears as if 'The Jerry Springer Show' is finally headed to that great Cesspool in the Ground". The article continues to say, in part, that

Day after day, Springer played the P.T. Barnum to a never-ending freak-show parade of guests as he pandered to the lowest common denominator. Guests would come out and reveal deep secrets on national television. Cheating on a spouse, having a strange fetish, that sort of thing. Hate groups were trotted out so the host and the studio audience (and the folks at home) could boo and hiss. Transvestites were exploited for laughs. Prostitutes bragged about

⁸⁶ Laura Backstrom, "From the Freak Show to the Living Room: Cultural Representations of Dwarfism and Obesity," *Sociological Forum* 27, no. 3 (2012); 683-684, <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.snhu.edu/stable/23262184>

their work. Some guests would flash the audience. Others would start brawling as the feverish crowd chanted “JAIR-REE, JAIR-REE, JAIR-REE!” (Springer would almost always be in the crowd when the violence broke out, shaking his head and staying out of the fray, as if to say, “Hey folks, this isn’t MY doing.”)⁸⁷

The producers of shows like *The Jerry Springer Show*, differ from other more refined shows in that they reject all pretense of rational discussion and have dispensed with having expert witnesses or therapists to provide assistance to the guests. Shows like *Springer* are also always building their bench of future guests. Just as a sideshow promoter might approach an abnormally tall or obese person on the street, so too do the tabloid talk shows actively recruit. At the end of an episode, producers typically throw up a pitch to the televised audience to the effect of: “Does your teen daughter dress too trashy? Or “Have you been cheating on your spouse, and you want to come clean?” ... write to ... and tell us your story.” Despite the low-brow nature of *Jerry Springer* and it being the target of critical and social condemnation, it “has also become the most popular show on the air, eclipsing even *Oprah* in the ratings”.⁸⁸

These examples of otherness in contemporary popular culture, merely take root in the freak show tradition as illustrated in films and television. The early films portrayed otherness, and traditional freak show performers specifically, in a monstrous light. The superhero films turn things around and the freak becomes the protagonist. Daytime talk shows offer up otherness on display in the form of extreme social disfunction and certain reality television programs have successfully reintroduced some of the traditional Victorian-era freaks. Apart from these forms of entertainment that capitalize on elements of the circus sideshow, there remain a few who still

⁸⁷ Richard Roper, “Good Riddance to ‘Jerry Springer,’ The Bottom of the Talk-Show Barrel,” *Chicago Sun Times*, June 18, 2018, accessed October 21, 2018. <https://chicago.suntimes.com/entertainment/good-riddance-to-jerry-springer-the-bottom-of-the-talk-show-barrel/>

⁸⁸ Grindstaff, *Daytime Talk Shows*, 117.

offer audiences the traditional freak show experience, most notably, Coney Island USA's Sideshows by the Seashore.

The Contemporary Sideshow: Freaks and Proud!

The Coney Island Circus Sideshow is the last remaining, permanently housed circus sideshow where audiences can experience a traditional ten-in-one freak show. Dick Zygun founded Coney Island USA in 1980. His non-profit organization includes not only Sideshows by the Seashore (the official title), but also the Coney Island Museum, and the truly unique Sideshow School, where anyone with the money and the desire can learn the sideshow tradecraft. As advertised on their website, students

Learn Ancient Skills from the Very Best in the Business! Have you ever dreamed of running away with the circus? Did anyone ever call you a freak? Well, now's your chance to become one! At Coney Island USA's Sideshow School, you can learn how to hammer a 20-penny nail right into your skull and then paint a banner trumpeting your new career! You'll work with Professa Adam Realman to learn the ins and outs of the working acts of the sideshow.⁸⁹

The school is only three-days long, but upon completion, students will be prepared to enter the sideshow industry as performers trained in the following acts: The Basics of Fire Eating and Breathing and Fire Safety, Human Blockhead, The Fundamentals of Sword Swallowing, Bed of Nails, Stunts with Various Traps, Glass Walking, Blade Box, Electric Chair, and Snake Care. Graduates of the school are encouraged to perform on stage during their live shows.

⁸⁹ Coney Island USA, "Sideshow School and Burlesque Master Class," www.coneyisland.com, accessed October 20, 2018, <https://www.coneyisland.com/programs/sideshowschool>.

Most serious sideshow performers making the circuit have at some point displayed their talents for audiences at the Coney Island Circus Sideshow. Currently, the sideshow performers featured include fire artists, sword swallowers, glass walkers, etc., but also some of the industry's top shock performers like Jelly Boy the Clown, a performance artist who calls himself the Upside-Down Clown. He performs acts designed to repulse such as suspension tricks, where he dangles weights attached to hooks from his eyelids and other extremities, also incorporating fire eating and sword swallowing. Of significance, is that while sideshows have long since abandoned displaying acts with physical disabilities, and moved toward performance artists, the Coney Island Sideshow has once again given people with physical disabilities a stage on which to perform.

Among the acts with physical disabilities, some are more traditional than others. Xander Lovecraft, for example, is a little person and the self-proclaimed "Burlesque Mercenary for Hire", who was born in and for the sideshow. Among the comedic and self-debasing moments of his act, he too employs shock by pounding nails into his face. The Velvet Crayon is a most curious attraction. Physically disabled and wheelchair bound, he does not have any discernable talent to warrant his being on stage. He does a ribbon dance in his wheelchair, with another sideshow performer on stage with him to pick up his props when he drops them and occasionally lift him from his chair as part of the choreographed routine. It is if, despite his lack of talent, he has found acceptance and purpose in the sideshow. Nati Amos de Huerta, who performs as Nati Amos, a fire performer born with an extreme congenital disorder that left her with 1/3rd of a face and disfigured hands. Additionally, she has an allergy to opiates. Because she endured countless surgeries growing up, Nati developed a high tolerance for pain. Nati was invited to speak at a TEDx in Jersey City where she delivered a speech called "The Misnomer of Disability in the

Work Environment” She is currently pursuing a master’s in molecular biology. Lastly, there is Sarah Houbolt, AKA Sarah Birdgirl, whose physical disfigurement closely resembles “Koo Koo the Bird Girl” from Tod Browning’s film *Freaks* who suffered from a form of Seckel syndrome, characterized by a small head, narrow bird-like face with a beak-like nose, and large eyes. The syndrome is typically associated with intellectual disability, but it is not present in Sarah Birdgirl’s condition.

In a promotional piece produced for the 2016 SNAP Arts and Disability festival, Sarah Birdgirl discusses her motivation for doing what she does, stating she likes the sideshow because it means “pushing your body to do unusual things; things that are out of the norm; things that are unexpected. I also love sideshow because it is a really important part of the circus history and also the history of performers with disability”. She goes on to say that she will be doing her “Koo Koo The Bird Girl” performance at the SNAP festival, what she describes as a one-woman show about the history of sideshow performance. Sarah has grown accustomed to people staring and recognizes the familiar look on the faces of those in the audience. “When I first arrive on state and they don’t know who I am, people do take a moment and kind of go, ‘huh?’, so I go, okay this is me. I present myself in my work and then I really try and create the unexpected; created a little bit of magic, change perceptions”.⁹⁰ While performers come and go, Coney Island Circus Sideshow is always fielding new acts; new performers with ever-wilder abilities and performances.

⁹⁰ *SNAP Festival Sarah BirdGirl Promo*, prod. Arthur Creative Services, perf. Sarah "Birdgirl" Houbolt, [www.youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AkLFwh6jh6M), September 6, 2016, accessed November 10, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AkLFwh6jh6M>.

In support of this research, the good folks at Coney Island USA arranged for an interview with their Sideshow School Professa, and veteran sideshow performer, Adam “Realman” Rinn. Adam, born and raised on Coney Island, has spent the last fifteen years perfecting his sideshow craft; his polished one-man show which includes sword swallowing, fire eating, glass walking, etc. Essentially, all of the skills taught in the Sideshow School have been mastered by Adam, all put together with perfect comedic timing. Adam came into the industry working sideshow tents when they were still operating profitably in carnivals and fairs. He recalls the difficulties that befell the sideshows and echoes the sentiments of the sideshow proprietors who insisted that political correctness had little to do with their demise; that it was in fact economics that killed the sideshow. “The sideshows couldn’t compete in that environment,” Adam began. “The carnival owners could fit 10 rides in the same space the sideshow tents took up, and it was almost all profit. Who could blame them? But to say that it was exploitation that did it...let’s just say that we industry people disagree. There were so many rides and attractions, that the visiting the sideshow tent became an if-we-have-time activity.

The discussion turned to disability, and the unfairness of society to deny these performers their rights. Adam expressed a sentiment not unique in the industry, that it does not make sense to claim exploitation if those being exploited are doing so willingly. He acquiesced the point, as most do, that display of mental or cognitive disabilities can certainly fall into that category because they may not have the capacity to make an informed decision; that in these circumstances it is easy to exploit. “You have to understand,” Adam said, “when the circus sideshows were employing freaks with disabilities, there weren’t other opportunities. There weren’t Walmart greeter positions at the time. If you weren’t institutionalized, you were likely in a sideshow. People don’t realize,” he said, concluding his thoughts on the matter, “the freaks,

especially in the hey-day, made more that you and me. Then they are told that what they do is exploitive, and they are booted from the circuses. No one bothered to ask them if they felt exploited. We have disabled performers now and they love and defend what they do. I don't think it was any different then".⁹¹

The Coney Island Circus Sideshow may be the last traditional stationary ten-in-one sideshow attraction, but they are not the only freak show in operation. The Venice Beach Freakshow made a strong attempt to bring the traditional sideshow to a more contemporary audience. Not unlike Coney Island, Venice Beach was a perfect location for such an attraction, and for a while it enjoyed great success, even earning its own reality television show on AMC as earlier noted. In an article written for *LA Weekly* after the announced closure of Venice Beach Freakshow, it is suggested that the reason for the closure was not lack of success, it was gentrification. At least Tod Ray, the founder, has strong feelings along these lines, saying that "This is a classic example of where art, freedom, culture and creativity meets greed, arrogance and just pure deceitfulness". He believes that the company Snapchat has disguised itself as the culprit; that it is they who would not renew his lease. Venice Beach is becoming the most expensive real estate in LA and companies like Snapchat are just doing this as an investment and want to avoid bad publicity. Ray believes that increased real estate values are bringing investors with "their lack of vision, they're also killing a lot of the culture along the way and really pushing out the family businesses that have made Venice what it is".⁹² As previously argued, it tends to be the venues that change as the freaks continue to evolve with the times. The sideshow

⁹¹ Adam "Realman" Rinn, "Adam "Realman" Rinn," telephone interview by author, November 9, 2018.

⁹² Jennifer Swann, "R.I.P., Venice Beach Freakshow," *www.laweekly.com*, April 29, 2017, accessed September 01, 2018, <https://www.laweekly.com/>.

as a traveling group of performers have also aligned themselves with rock music festivals, and none more prolifically than the Hellzapoppin' Circus Sideshow Revue.

Hellzapoppin' wants to make freak shows even freakier, employing the wildest acts out there. They call themselves “mavericks, trail blazers, rebels, rule breakers, outlaws...true uninhibited artists”, and that it is through the sideshow that their passion is fueled. They differentiate themselves from other sideshows, producing a unique sideshow spinoff with their “ROCK-N-ROLL circus stunt-show” boasting the deadliest stunts in live entertainment, promising that spectators will witness “performances using the human anatomy and death-defying stunts of mind over matter, yet with no blood and no pain”. Hellzapoppin', a self-denoted “Vaudeville Freak Show of Wonder”⁹³ also includes the standard feats and displays but with an edge, including: Fire Eating, Fire Breathing, The Bed of Nails, The Human Block-head, The Razor Sharp Machete Walk, Acrobatic Stunts, Glass Eating, Sword Swallowing, Knife Throwing & Archery using human targets, Illusion's like the Chinese Blade Box of Death, and Human Oddities & Curiosities such as a real-live half-man who walks on his bare hands on broken shards of glass and much more.⁹⁴

Bryce “the Govna” Graves is the *freak* behind Hellzapoppin' and continues to push his attractions to new levels. He created a new festival to be headlined by his Hellzapoppin' troupe called the *Congregation of Sinners Incorporated*. By the description, Graves appears to be re-branding the promise of spectacle that the circus proclaimed, featuring his Hellzapoppin', the Globe of Death Motorcycle Stunt Show, a motorcycle high-wire act, magicians, street

⁹³ Hellzapoppin' Circus Sideshow Review, "About," www.hellzapoppin.com/, accessed August 01, 2018, <https://www.hellzapoppin.com/>.

⁹⁴ Hellzapoppin', About.

performers, fortune tellers, old-time puppet shows, animal oddities, and carnival rides. Put them all together and you get “The Greatest Show in Hell”.⁹⁵ Erik “The lizardman” Sprague is a performer on tour with Hellzapoppin’ who agreed to be interviewed for this research. He laughed at Graves’ choice of tagline, saying that it is “as in-your-face as you can get”⁹⁶ which is entirely the point.

The Lizardman (Sprague) is the ultimate expression of a self-made freak, having had his body surgically altered for effect. In addition to his full body tattoo art, Sprague had his tongue surgically bifurcated, and Teflon implants placed in his forehead, completing his reptilian look. As a child, Sprague loved the *Godzilla* films, and decided to become what he saw as beautiful. Sprague insists that his “was a calculated decision to exploit things I knew drew fascination. An attempt to not just create something fascinating but to be something fascinating. My success is an indication of how accurate my ideas about what fascinates people were/are.” This is a statement that might as well have come out of P.T. Barnum’s mouth.

It was fortuitous that both Adam “Realman” Rinn of the Coney Island Circus Sideshow and Erik “The Lizardman” Sprague of Hellzapoppin’ agreed to be interviewed. It was the hope of this research to end with an examination of contemporary sideshow performers and to elicit from them their reasoning behind what they do, their take on the history of freak shows, and thoughts on exploitation. Both performers were comfortable speaking for their brethren when they insist that none of them feel they are being exploited. According to Sprague, the performers get a thrill when they see people’s reaction to them. The performers know their audience and

⁹⁵ Hellzapoppin' Circus Sideshow Review, " Congregation of Sinners Incorporated," www.hellzapoppin.com/, accessed August 01, 2018, <https://www.hellzapoppin.com/>.

⁹⁶ Erik “The Lizardman” Sprague,” telephone interview by author, October 18, 2018.

want to feed them what they want, even if they don't know they want it. When asked if children react differently than adults, Sprague was careful to emphasize that children usually get a different show. Hellzapoppin's audiences, being associated primarily with rock festivals, don't usually have many kids. Most adults look on with morbid fascination and are more interested in why. Kids, according to Sprague, typically want to know if it hurt, and what hurt the most. "Reactions like these are natural," Sprague concludes, "and much of my show is designed to take those natural reactions and bring you through them. I create an uncomfortable situation and then help the audience through it".⁹⁷

⁹⁷ Sprague, Erik "The Lizardman."

Chapter 5: Budget and Staffing

The budget for this project is small. The largest budget concern would be the labor in research and web/graphic design. The digital footprint of the exhibition is small and will not extend MoPOP beyond the storage limitations of its hosting entity's current pricing structure. This project does not mandate the hiring of additional staff, or the permanent reallocation of existing staff. The research costs listed as \$3680.00, have been provided pro-bono, leaving MoPOP with only the cost associated with miscellaneous supplies and the efforts of the in-house web designer (see Fig. 2).

Otherness as Entertainment: The Victorian-Era Freak Show and its Legacy in Contemporary Popular Culture		
A Project Produced for the Museum of Pop Culture (MoPOP)		
Proposed Budget		
<u>Research Costs</u>		
160 hrs @ \$23/hr	\$3680.00	\$3680.00
<u>Web/Graphic Design</u>		
40 hrs @ \$26/hr	\$1040.00	\$1040.00
<u>Misc. Office supplies</u>		
various	\$125.00	\$125.00
	Total:	\$4845.00

Figure 2: Proposed Budget

Because this project is strictly an online venture, the associative costs typically associated with physical exhibitions are non-factors. The production and publication of this exhibition will serve to further the public's interest in MoPOP, drawing their attention to the other fine exhibitions only available in-house and thereby potentially increasing ticket sales. In this sense, this exhibition is a value-added piece to the museum.

To offset what costs are accumulated, there are grants available which would be well-suited for this project. As an example, the American Historical Association (AHA) makes available annually the Albert J. Beveridge Grant for Research in the History of the Western Hemisphere. Upon examination of past winners, I found that social and cultural subjects fare well by this grant. Some examples of the titles of past winners:

- When Old Age Changed: Inventing the 'Senior State,' 1945-80
- A Culture of Insecurity: The Early Republic as a Post-Colonial Nation, 1789-1830
- To Cure a Sinful Nation: Conversion Therapy and the Making of Modern America, 1930 to the Present Day
- Captives of Conquest: How Indigenous Slavery Shaped the Spanish Atlantic, 1490-1550
- Religion and Insanity in the United States, 1820-80
- Alvita Akiboh, *Imperial Material: Objects and Identity in the United States Colonial Empire, 1898-1959*⁹⁸

Another potential grant worth pursuing is through the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). The Digital Projects for the Public grant is supportive of research which presents “analysis that deepens public understanding of significant humanities ideas” through sound humanities scholarship designed to attract broad audiences. These projects must be

⁹⁸ "Albert J. Beveridge Grant for Research in the History of the Western Hemisphere," [Historians.org](https://www.historians.org/awards-and-grants/grants-and-fellowships/albert-j-beveridge-grant), accessed November 27, 2018, <https://www.historians.org/awards-and-grants/grants-and-fellowships/albert-j-beveridge-grant>.

presented in primarily digital platforms and formats, including websites, and be designed to appeal to broad public audiences.⁹⁹ Such appeal, however, is no guarantee. While this research has been careful to avoid disparaging language and unfounded claims, the subject matter is still sensitive to certain demographics. So, before presenting my final conclusions, a brief discussion of ethical considerations is in order as well as some recommendations for further research into this area of focus.

⁹⁹ National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), "Digital Projects for the Public," National Endowment for the Humanities, accessed November 28, 2018, <https://www.neh.gov/grants/public/digital-projects-the-public>.

Chapter 6: Recommendations and Ethical Considerations

There are no significant ethical problems to consider in this research. While many may still consider the freak show a shameful exploitation of disability, the consensus among the performers themselves is that they feel no such disparity. Many performers like Erik “The Lizardman” Sprague, are self-made freaks who wear it like a badge of honor. As already discussed, the performers impacted by the freak show’s fall from glory were of the same mindset as The Lizardman. The show was their livelihood and the cast members were their community; their family. MoPOP targets the youth, a demographic in tune with contemporary popular culture. The likelihood that the message, the images, or the video clips will be offensive to the targeted audience is slim. While a small portion of the audience may take offense at some of the content, the video clips were decent enough to get by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) standards.

Regarding the historical argument presented, this research served to challenge some prevalent ideas regarding the demise of the freak show. With that in mind, it has been the intent of this research embrace the *Shared Values of Historians* as spelled out in the American Historical Association’s “Statement on Standards of Professional Conduct”. These standards encourage historians to engage in “critical dialogue—with each other, with the wider public, and with the historical record ...; that the presentation of “underrepresented points of view is critical to ensuring the integrity of our scholarship and historical practice”.¹⁰⁰ It is out of respect for the

¹⁰⁰ American Historical Association, "Statement on Standards of Professional Conduct (updated 2018)," [www.historians.org](https://www.historians.org/jobs-and-professional-development/statements-standards-and-guidelines-of-the-discipline/statement-on-standards-of-professional-conduct), NP, accessed November 27, 2018, <https://www.historians.org/jobs-and-professional-development/statements-standards-and-guidelines-of-the-discipline/statement-on-standards-of-professional-conduct>.

study of history that this research seeks not to debunk, but rather expand upon the historiography by offering up alternative interpretations; by connecting what are believed to be otherwise unconnected factors. This research may even suggest that the historians writing on the matter; historians that tacitly offer up standard conclusions which reflect positively on American society, are perpetuating American myth. This is not meant as disrespect, only that perhaps this topic may have a lot in common with other topic in American history such as slavery, Indian relocation, and WWII internment camps, that remain insufficiently critical of our storied past. This research will be careful not to *see* what is *not* there, manufacture evidence, in any way dishonor the historical record, or intentionally cast American society in a wholly-negative light.¹⁰¹

Regarding intellectual property rights, most items relating to Barnum's contributions (photos, couriers, prints, brochures, etc.) are free from copyright protections. Permissions have been obtained by The Barnum Museum, the Harry Ransom Center, the Bridgeport History Center, and the Connecticut Digital Archives. The contemporary exhibition pieces involving television programming clips are more sternly rejected by the network legal departments. One such network, Discovery (The Learning Channel), rejected my request and informed me that they were starting a file just in case. While the project is certainly defensible as fair use, there is no need to poke the lion. Screenshots of the YouTube videos will serve as links to the image gallery where the URLs are available to follow, should the online visitor wish to watch the clips in their entirety. Because this method pulls the audience away from the exhibition, navigation instructions should make it clear that visitors must use the back button to return to the exhibition.

¹⁰¹ American Historical Association, Statement on Standards, NP.

Were the creation and publication of this exhibition to be green-lit, following a few suggestions or recommendations would make the project that much better. First, a navigation solution would be helpful so that the visitor is not taken out of the exhibition. Second, there are more connections which can be made, but not all examples of difference or otherness are fitting comparisons. Otherness is a broad concept. There are two areas which, if explored further, would solidify the argument. First, more can be done with the Marvel and DC Comics connection. This research only touched on it. Second, a relatively new form of otherness is making its way into popular culture that is gaining enthusiasm. The notion of Transhumanism or Posthumanism is that science and technology will play a part in the future evolution of humans. Cyborgs, bionics, 3D printed organs, and the like will elevate them (us, presumably) above humanity or beyond humanity, making them (us) *other* than human.

Conclusion

It is disingenuous to suggest that the freak show died. In some instances, the freak show exists in nearly the same form today as it did in the mid-19th century. Just as the performers of yesteryear, contemporary freaks are born as well as created. Like their predecessors, as well, contemporary freaks do not feel objectified; that, were they objectified, it would not bother them. They are performers, first and foremost. Society's gallantry is misguided, while the thought is appreciated. The *freaks* (then and now) choose to offer up their otherness for exhibition. Not only do they support themselves and their families in this fashion, but also find a sense of community amongst their brethren.

Otherness is not confined to the physical. Otherness is spectacle as well. No one makes this case stronger than Jerry Springer. When audience 19th-century Americans were introduced to "Zipp The What Is It", they were truly befuddled. 'It' was truly mysterious. When Springer introduces a guest, who is about to propose marriage to his step-daughter in front of his current wife who thinks she is on the show for a makeover, we are wading deep into otherness. To the regular audience member, this behavior is as strange and shocking as any known physical maladies. Similarly, this brand of freak has both natural and self-made versions. The Jerry Springer Show is riddled with controversy, the guests deemed fakes. Many suggest that the acts are staged and that the people are getting paid to do it, despite the show's insistence otherwise.

Whether talking about conjoined twins, fat ladies, bearded ladies, little people, or giants, we are dealing with otherness. As we watch superheroes battle villains, we are watching otherness. When we are being entertained by extreme social disfunction; by displays of

outrageous personal behavior, we are dealing in otherness. Otherness is a thread that is woven into the fabric of popular culture.

The notion put forth by prominent sociologists like Robert Bogdan that the freak show fell out of favor and died because society's taste for them soured after learning the true nature of the disabilities are placing social considerations prevalent in society beginning in the 1970s on historical events in Victorian and War era America. This seems based on the notion that the earliest displays of human curiosities came in the early-to-mid 1800s in the explosive popularity of Dime Museums; institutions which exploited the public's enthrallment with the scientific revolution, of which and of significance was Darwinism. Darwinism allowed Victorian audiences to assign lesser values to the freaks on display. They became other than us, and therefor a curiosity. In much the same way that an American seeing an Elephant for the first time is awe-inspiring, if presented for instance Barnum's Zip the "What is it?", audiences would be mesmerized. Bogdan, et al., will have us believe that further knowledge of the actual maladies; that our realization that they are, like us, human, caused a universal social edification resulting in the demise of the freak show. Although a fan of the Annales school of thought, the use of sociologists to determine causation should be reserved for contemporary history or issues. Particularly when the historical record indicates that other factors were present that would trump the sociological explanations tacitly accepted by historians. In reality, we like the conclusions posited by sociologists like Bogdan. Their explanations allows us to paint a flattering picture of American society who magically became politically correct overnight, 50 years before politically correct was even a thing. What it does not do is explain how it is that we are now, once again,

placing on high the freakiest among us and gathering around them in celebration much in the same fashion as did American's when the circus was the biggest show in town.

Even when times were the toughest for the freaks, it was not just the freaks that were impacted. The anti-circus laws targeted the circus before there were freaks and sideshows. The economic challenges coming out of the depression, and societal changes stemming from trying times and long wars, left Americans with a taste for a more family-type entertainment. Even casting the freaks aside in an attempt to placate society had little effect at all. The circuses were never going to be able to compete with the theme parks, and especially not with television and cinema. It is interesting, if not ironic, that the one element of the circus as it flourished in the Golden Age to make the transition into mass popular culture, it was the freak. The circus and the

dime museums have both virtually vanished, but the freak show remains. It will be interesting to see what iterations of freakishness are to follow.

Appendix: A

OTHERNESS AS ENTERTAINMENT: THE VICTORIAN-ERA FREAK SHOW AND ITS LEGACY IN CONTEMPORARY POPULAR CULTURE

OTHERNESS:

- “1. The quality or state of being other or different, or
2. something that is other or different”.[\[1\]](#)**

In the history of American popular culture, nothing exemplified this fascination as obviously as did the freak show. The origins of the freak show can be traced to the mid-16th century, but the practice began to take form in 17th-century England where people flocked to witness displays of human deformity. One of the earliest documented acts was that of the Italian-born conjoined twins Lazarus and Joannes Baptista Colloredi (1616 – circa 1646) who entertained the court of Charles I of England in 1642. Freaks remained a cultural curiosity throughout the 18th century and could be found exhibited in taverns, at fairgrounds, and sometimes as featured performers in talent shows on both sides of the Atlantic. It was in the 19th-century when the freak show really took off.

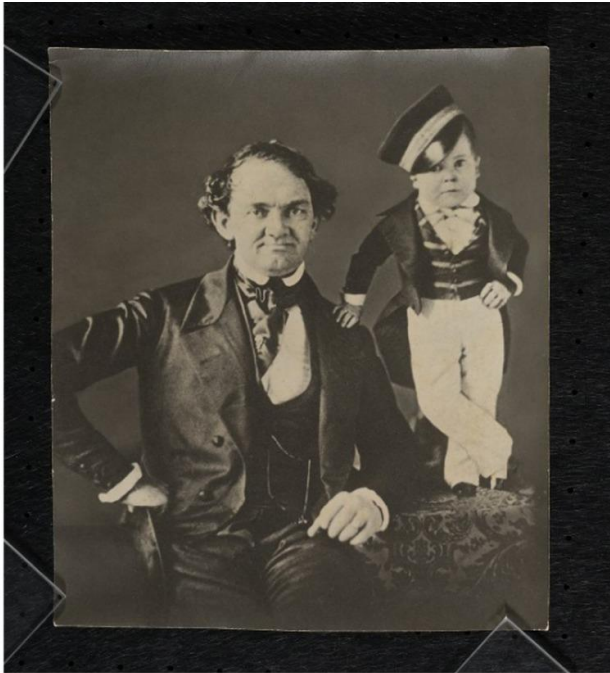
The freak show took on its familiar form in the 19th-century in large part due to the efforts of England's Tom Norman and America's P.T. Barnum, both showmen who sought to profit from the exhibition of human oddities. The freak show remained a popular cultural phenomenon and leisure activity from the mid-19th to the mid-20th century in both England and America. This exhibition, however, will limit itself to the subject as it pertains to US popular culture, while noting that there is little differentiating the content and character of the freak show from one side of the Atlantic to the other.

The current historiography on the subject reveals a near-uniform consensus that society's fascination with and acceptance of the exhibition of human deformity as a form of entertainment began to dwindle in the late 19th and early 20th centuries; that after advances in medical science gave names to the conditions of the otherwise mysterious freaks, society's fascination turned to sympathy. Disability awareness and sensitivity toward exploitation turned this once popular form of public entertainment into a taboo activity. Scholars use this cultural turn to mark the end of the freak show by the end of the 1950s.

Yet, here we can see in contemporary popular culture; in our movies, on our televisions, online, and even at locations such as Coney Island, that the sideshow; the freaks never went away, they simply evolved.

[\[1\]](#) Noah Webster, *Merriam-Webster.com*, s.v. "Otherness," accessed September 1, 2018, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/otherness>.

THE ORIGIN STORY: THE BIRTH OF THE HUMAN MENAGERIE



Photograph: P.T. Barnum and young Charles S. Stratton, 1850-1859

Courtesy Bridgeport History Center

In this photograph of P.T. Barnum and Charles S. Stratton as a young man, Barnum sits on the left-hand side of the photo with Stratton leaning on him, wearing a sailor's uniform. Photographs like this one were often sold as a part of exhibitions, and in the case of performers whose claim to fame was related to their physical appearance or a developmental disability, the staging in photographs helped to emphasize their differences.

P.T. Barnum is, undoubtedly, the father of the sideshow and the champion of freaks. His contributions to the circus industry ought to be an aside to the fact that he arguably created what we now call popular or mass culture. He gave the American people their first taste celebrity in the personage of General Tom Thumb, as portrayed by Charles Stratton whose marriage to fellow little person and Barnum performer Lavinia Warren was Manhattan's social event of the year in 1883. Reportedly, over 10,000 people witnessed the nuptials. This was Barnum's doing; his gift. Barnum is considered by many the father of marketing and promotion, the father of the dime museum, and among the most innovative circus impresarios of the time.

P.T. Barnum was the circus guy. Sadly, this is what most people know about Barnum. That is to say that this is what remains of him in our national collective memory; our memory that is passed down rather than learned; that is common historical knowledge. The circus, although significant, came later in Barnum's life.

Barnum was a museum man by trade.

Barnum gave the world, first and foremost, the dime museum. It was within the walls of his American Museum where the freak show was born, and it was a traveling version of Barnum's ill-fated museum that made up the content and character of the sideshow tents.

Barnum launched his career in the mid -1830s with his exhibition of Joice Heth, an elderly enslaved African-American woman. Heth had been exhibited by others with little success, but Barnum brought her to New York, advertised her age as 161, and claimed that she had been nursemaid to the young George Washington. Beginning in 1835 and for seven months thereafter, Barnum exhibited Heth in cities and towns across the northeast, booking venues as small as taverns to much larger concert halls. Barnum marketed Heth in the penny press newspapers which were tabloid-style newspapers catering to urban working-class readers and challenged the cultural authority of more high-brow newspapers. Barnum, early on, knew where his audience was and played to their curiosity. When ticket sales tapered off, Barnum wrote an anonymous letter to a Boston newspaper claiming that Heth was a fake -- that she was actually a machine, made up of whale bone and old leather. Crowds flocked again to see her. Heth died of natural causes in 1836. Although a prominent doctor performed an autopsy and concluded that Heth was no more than 80, Barnum countered that the corpse was a fake and continued to claim that Heth was still alive and performing in Europe and that she would one day return.



Handbill: Joice Heth, "Great Attraction Just Arrived at Hingham...", circa 1835.
Courtesy Bridgeport History Center

This 1835 Handbill for an appearance of Joice Heth in New Milford features an illustration of an elderly African American woman wearing a bonnet and featuring her long fingernails. Around her is her name. Above her she is called "the greatest natural and national curiosity in the world" and her age is given below as 161 years old.



P.T. Barnum's American Museum 1850-1855.
Print courtesy The Barnum Museum

Large black and white print depicting Barnum's American Museum in New York City in the early 1850s. The view is from Broadway, mainly showing the front of the museum with its highly decorated facade. During the time the building stood, this facade featured oval plaques painted with wild animals and a balcony on which musicians were often set up to attract crowds.

knew that people were drawn to spectacle; that they were naturally curious. He also believed that it did not matter if something was true. If it was a good story, people would not care. The truth is less entertaining than fiction, even if the truth is already spectacular. Barnum knew that the more mysterious and exotic the backstory, the more interested were the customers. Barnum was in the practice of fabricating backstories, particularly with his gaffed (fake) freaks. The Albino Family is an example of created otherness. Billing them as Albinos with pink eyes and black parents when in fact they were Dutch.

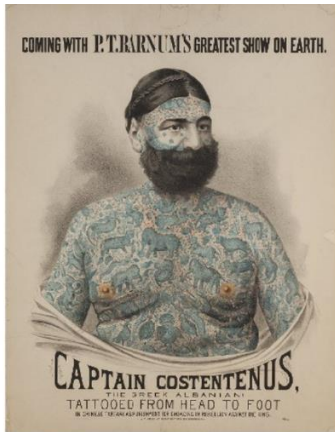
Barnum success exhibiting Joice Heth gave him the name recognition and money needed to break into the museum business. Barnum purchased Scudder's American Museum in 1841 and added to its stagnant existing collections live acts including freak shows and novelty performers. Three years after purchasing it, Barnum's American Museum boasted having over 30,000 exhibits, featuring Siamese twins, fat boys, bearded ladies, rubber men, legless wonders, and an array of midgets. By the 1850s it was a premier tourist destination; a must see in New York City. By 1864, Barnum's museum housed over 850,000 items. In the twenty-three years that Barnum operated his first American Museum, from 1842 to 1865, he sold more than thirty million tickets. Barnum's acquisition sparked the beginning of both the dime museum phenomenon and era of the freak show. And while many dime museums sprung up to compete, there were none better than Barnum's.

Barnum's gift was his uncanny understanding of people and what drives them. He



Print: The Albino Family, 1855.
Courtesy The Barnum Museum

promoting the famous "Albino Family" who exhibited themselves at P.T. Barnum's American Museum. While advertised as an African family with albinism, they were actually Danish.



Captain Costentenus, 1876.
Courtesy The Barnum Museum

This poster features P.T. Barnum's popular attraction, "Captain Costentenus". Barnum promoted him with the fabricated story that he had been "tattooed from head to foot in Chinese Tartary, as punishment for engaging in rebellion against the king."

Tartary as punishment for engaging in rebellion against the King, thereby creating another level to the otherness.

Perhaps the greatest example of Barnum's ability to maximize the qualities of otherness as they appealed to his audiences came in the form(s) of his "What is it?" variants which he began displaying in 1840. These exhibits were meant to intrigue the audiences who had become familiar with the theories of evolution and were curious about anything proclaiming to be a missing link.

In 1840 Barnum first displayed an orangutan named Mile as the missing link and went through various versions including a Burmese Girl named Krao Farini who worked for Barnum from the late 1880s till her death in 1926. She had simian-like qualities, including flexible limbs and a hairy body. She performed scantily clad, and after shows audience members were able reach out and touch her. Barnum's most famous "What is it?", came in the form of Zip. Zip, born in 1842 as William Henry Johnson, was what was known as a pinhead freak. He most likely suffered from microcephaly which usually, but not always, included developmental delays. Zip had a very long career, and at different stages in his career, he was known as 'The Monkey Man' or 'Man-Monkey'. Barnum was clever to not directly label or assign an identity to his "What is it?" exhibitions. Barnum left the assigning of value to the audience, exaggerating the otherness by ostensibly stating that - *We don't know what it is? Do you?*

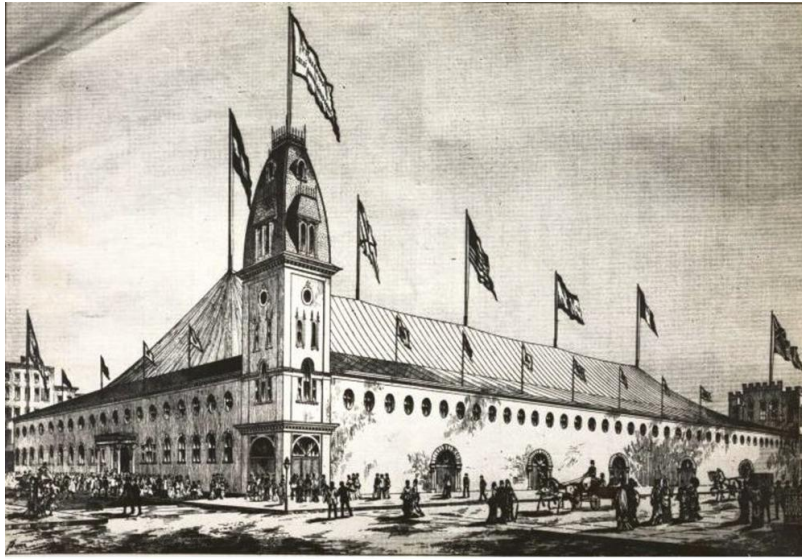
When Barnum first recruited Charles Stratton, he informed the young boy's mother that despite the fact that he was 4 years old, they would advertise him as 11 years old, and from London. When Stratton's mother questioned this fabrication, Barnum insisted that it was a necessary marketing strategy to ensure the success of his exhibit. Barnum then took the young boy and trained him as an entertainer and to carry the air of nobility that would make up his famous character General Tom Thumb.

Another example would be the case of Captain Costentenus, Barnum's tattooed man. The fact that he was tattooed from head to toe was a rare enough characteristic to attract an audience, and his true story was likely fascinating by itself. Barnum wanted something more exotic and thus promoted him as having been tattooed in a Chinese



Print: What is it?...or "Man-Monkey"
Courtesy The Barnum Museum

In 1840, P.T. Barnum began a long tradition of featuring curiosities he proclaimed were missing links, catering to society's fascination with emergent science.



P.T. Barnum's Museum, Menagerie and Circus, International Zoological Garden, Polytechnic Institute and Hippodrome
 Courtesy Circus World Museum

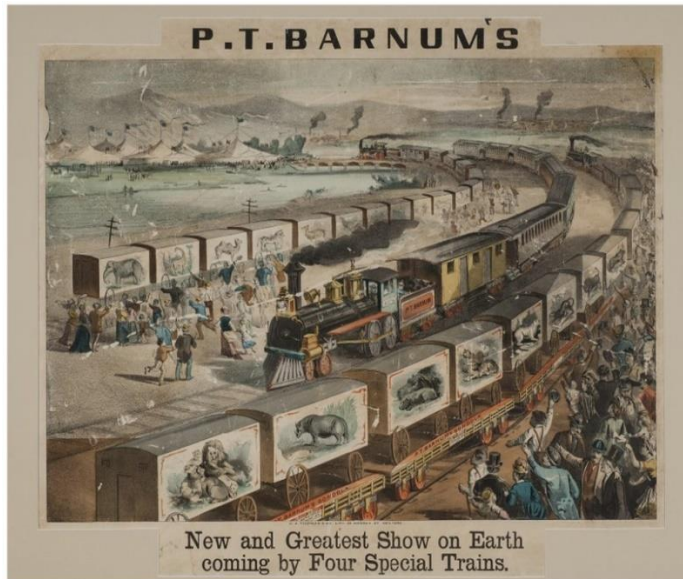
In 1871, Barnum would assemble all of the elements of his new circus and for one week it ran in the Hippodrome to enormous success. Barnum then took the show on the road, touring all New England, refining it every step of the way. The Hippodrome would undergo several iterations, known now as Madison Square Garden.

fortune into the endeavor, he placed orders for numerous animals for the menagerie and printing hundreds of thousands of copies of his publicity pamphlets *Barnum's Advance Currier*. The show played in Brooklyn for a week in April of 1871 before heading out on a tour of the rest of the State and greater New England as P.T. Barnum's Great Traveling Exposition and World's Fair.

Barnum's vision for his new circus was as a traveling version of what was contained in his American Museum. He planned a grouping of smaller tents where audiences were treated to such experiences as automata, magicians, his famed litany of human curiosities such as a giant, dwarf, bearded woman, an 'armless wonder', among others. At the end of the series of smaller tents, the audience gathered under the big top for clowns, acrobats, and equestrian exhibitions. The tour was such a success that the venue exceeded capacity and people were turned away.

Barnum's American Museum would burn down in 1865, after which Barnum returned to his home in Bridgeport Connecticut. He dabbled in politics, starting in 1865 when he served in the Connecticut legislature. He was later elected Mayor of Bridgeport. His life in politics, away from his original passion, did not endure. In a way, Barnum ran off and joined the circus. He was enticed out of retirement by Dan Costello and William Cameron Coup whom he partnered with to create P.T. Barnum's Museum, Menagerie and Circus, International Zoological Garden, Polytechnic Institute and Hippodrome.

Barnum must have been stir-crazy after retirement because after agreeing to the deal he proceeded to invest a small



"P. T. Barnum's New and Greatest Show on Earth coming by Four Special Trains" 1875-1876.

Photo Courtesy The Barnum Museum

This color lithograph called "P. T. Barnum's New and Greatest Show on Earth coming by Four Special Trains" is an overhead depiction of three trains, their boxcar side panels painted with a variety of animals, including lions, hippos, elephants, zebras, and camels. This scene

The success of the initial tour invigorated the owners who then took measures to expand their enterprise. Their first action was to add a second ring, thereby doubling the number of exhibitions and drastically increasing seating capacity. Next, Barnum purchased more animals, added more exhibitions, and employed more freaks. Their final action was to put the circus on the rails. The decision to incorporate the railroad into their circus operation allowed them to play towns in the Midwest. This action would come to define the circus industry and lead into the golden years of the circus where no other form of popular entertainment could compete.

The golden age of the circus came in the height of the circus's transition to the rails. The circuses during this time were able to bring their productions to small towns throughout the country. Stretching from the 1880s to the outbreak of World

War II, there was no grander event than the circus. The arrival of the circus train was colloquially known throughout the country as Circus Day and was met with unmatched enthusiasm.

When the circus came to town, businesses closed as did the schools. The town was inundated with people from the surrounding towns, arriving early to witness the arrival of the train, the unloading of the circus train cars, and the parade of animals and performers which typically followed to the delight of throngs of witnesses. Historians try to express the magnitude of the event in current terms because we are too far removed to 'get it'. But, try this...Circus day was like going to game seven of the world series on your birthday and catching the winning home run just moments after the jumbotron immortalized your marriage proposal (provided she said yes). If that seems an absurd amount of awesome, then you might be 'getting it'.

As this cultural juggernaut steamed through the last decades of the 1800s, the performers in the sideshow tents enjoyed their glory days as well. Alas, this romance between America and the freaks would not last. The hard times lay just ahead...

THE HARD TIMES: THE FREAK SHOW'S FALL FROM FAVOR



Jo-Jo The Dog Faced Boy, circa 1890
Photo: Charles Eisenmann/WikiMedia Commons/CC BY-SA 3.0

Suffering from hypertrichosis, in 1884 Feodor Jeftichew was introduced to his fans as Jo-Jo the Dog-Faced Boy and would become one of Barnum's top attractions. Jeftichew had Hypertrichosis which causes excessive hair growth on the body, rendering a person animal-like in appearance. Would Hypertrichosis Henry have sold as many tickets?

the sideshow from the decline of the institutions themselves which staged them. What we can see in the historical record is that society has been legislating against circus entertainment since the very beginning.

When examining the sorry fate of the freak show; the curiosities; the performers; the artists; the human beings, falling back on the notion of 'political correctness' as the most prevalent causal factor is the answer that we like the best. From the perspective of a historian researching through a social lens, this conclusion is well-supported in the secondary literature. We lost interest in the freak show, according to sociologists and social historians alike. The advances in science and medicine revealed to us the true maladies of our cherished sideshow performers, thereby supplanting our sense of wonder with a sense of pity. One example would be Feodor Jeftichew who was known as Jo-Jo the Dog-Faced boy to his fans. Thanks to engines of progress, the gaff was up, and it was revealed that Jo-Jo's growling and barking were for effect. He was not ferocious at all. He was just putting on a show. "Hypertrichosis Henry" would likely have sold fewer tickets.

The point of contention which has come about through this research is the fact that, despite the sincerity of the notion that society's fascination with sideshow performers evolved into sympathy and that such exploitation became seen as shameless and cruel, it seems impossible to distinguish in the timeline the decline of

The Anti-Circus Laws

Society has a complex relationship with the circus. Although multi-act circuses have been around as a form of leisure and entertainment in America as early as the 1790s, its significance as a national public pastime did not come until the 1820s and 1830s. Despite the growing popularity of the circus, large segments of society deemed it to be morally lacking. This is due, in part, because the rise in popularity of the circus happens just as the nation was amid a puritanical revival. Leaders of religious, political, and educational groups at the time denounced not just the circus, but also nearly all forms of commercial entertainment. To these leaders, the only pure forms of recreation were educational or religious in nature. In turn, they took up arms against the perceived immorality of commercialized entertainment by lobbying State and local legislators who, throughout the country, enacted laws designed to ameliorate society by banning idle entertainments which neither educate nor edify. Just one example of many: The State of New York passed in 1819 *An Act to Suppress Common Showmen, Mountebanks, and Jugglers* which declared that “It shall not be lawful for any person or persons, to exhibit or perform, for gain or profit, any puppet show, wire dance, or any other idle shows, acts or feats, which common showmen, mountebanks or jugglers, usually practice or perform, in any town in this state...” This, mind you, when the freaks had no role in the circus. They would come later, and society would counter with The Ugly Laws.

Much like how the circuses were swept up in the anti-theater laws of the 18th and 19th centuries, the sideshow performers, as members of the disabled or disfigured class, were likewise the victims of what are



The Municipal Code of Chicago: Comprising the Laws of Illinois Relating to the City of Chicago, and the Ordinances of the City Council. 1881.

The Ugly Laws

1612. Any person who is diseased, maimed, mutilated, or in any way deformed, so as to be an unsightly or disgusting object, or an improper person to be allowed in or on the streets, highways, thoroughfares or public places in this city, shall not therein or thereon expose himself or herself to public view, under the penalty of one dollar for each offense. On the conviction of any person for a violation of this section, if it shall seem proper and just, the fine provided for may be suspended, and such person detained at the police station, where he shall be well cared for, until he can be committed to the county poor house.

colloquially known as the Ugly Laws which began springing up in the late 1800s. Typically listed as unsightly beggar ordinances, these laws were written to rid all public places of the presence of the poor, the transient, and the deformed or disabled. These laws reflect a significant shift in society amidst three inter-connected social conditions. The first was the influx of new and often poor residents in urban areas. The second: an increased desire of cities to be bastions of American exceptionalism; each a city on the hill with its citizenry made up of self-sufficient and productive examples of American individualism. Lastly, and of most significance, America's elite and educated fell for the allure and false promise of the eugenics movement.

Chicago was not alone in its efforts to clean up the public spaces. Ordinances began to appear in all corners of the nation. They were enacted in New Orleans in 1879, Denver in 1886, Portland in 1881, and Lincoln, Nebraska in 1889, each containing the same working language. Reno was the last to pass an ugly law in 1905. Chicago made some changes in 1911, making their law stricter and more defined. Los Angeles attempted to pass an Ugly Law as late as 1913. Two other laws merit special attention and commentary because they significantly expand the definition of disability. Pennsylvania's 1891 version of the ugly laws further identified as undesirable those who exhibit[ed] any physical deformity produced by artificial means for hire. New York City's 1895 ban included not only those with physical disabilities but those with mental impairments as well by including in their definition any person who is idiotic or imbecilic. The ordinances of Pennsylvania and New York City serve to illustrate that society's concern is not with unsightly beggars or the "ugly", but rather with legislating normalcy by penalizing otherness. With a few exceptions, most of these laws were stricken in the 1960s and 1970s.



Market Street, San Francisco, with parade by the Ringling Brothers Circus, September 1900.

Courtesy Circus World Museum

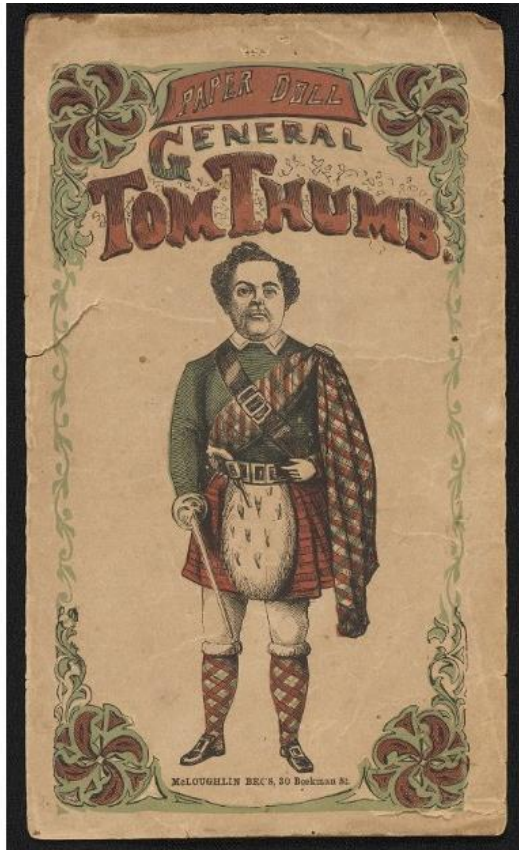
In this 1900 photograph of the Ringling Bros. Circus Day parade, depicts large crowds witnessing the procession down Market St. in San Francisco. The reality that circuses were not considered a family entertainment is clear in this photo with the near-complete absence of children.

All of these laws aside, the circus industry itself was not fairing well at this time. Americans were increasingly interested in the family-friendly entertainments that were springing up in the form of theme and amusement parks. Contrary to what contemporary audiences think, the circus in its glory days was not a children's event.

All of these laws aside, the circus industry itself was not faring well at this time. Americans were increasingly interested in the family-friendly entertainments that were springing up in the form of theme and amusement parks. Contrary to what contemporary audiences think, the circus in its glory days was not a children's event.

Not Child-Friendly

Society seemed to have loosened up after the Civil War regarding the acceptability of commercialized entertainments, including the circuses. Much of this was to do with the growing urban populations who demanded it. It may have been the forbidden ‘idleness’ of the event that held the most appeal. It was, as Barnum well-knew, above all else about entertainment. The old anti-theater laws which swept the circuses up in their broad definitions became increasingly unenforced. Many circuses took advantage of the increased demand and sought to grow their audiences by advertising their circuses as morally sound.



General Tom Thumb Paper Doll Set, 1863.
Courtesy the Barnum Museum

This paper doll set featuring Charles S. Stratton's character "General Tom Thumb" was created amidst the hype of "The Fairy Wedding" in response to the high demand for souvenir products. This set was a part of a series that included the bride Lavinia Warren and her sister Minnie.

Many local businesses resented the circus when it came to town because townsfolk would spend their money on circus and sideshow attractions instead of on local wares and services. Additionally, the circus brought with it the wrong element, spurring warnings from local newspapers like Little Rock's *Arkansas Democrat* which cautioned local residents in 1898 with a headline reading "Be Careful Tomorrow: Crooks Will Abound and Stores and Dwellings Should Be Watched."

Despite the efforts of the circus to present itself as a form of moral and decent entertainment, it faced another problem. At the turn of the century, Americans found themselves with more leisure time and were increasingly interested in activities and commercialized entertainments that were family friendly. The circus found significant competition in the emergent industry of family-friendly amusement parks. The circus at that time was a democratizing event that included men, women and minority races from all classes. But unlike its cousin, the dime museum, which held family appeal, the circus was not considered suitable for children. During the latter decades of the 19th century children did not attend the circus in great numbers.

Aware of the growing trends, the circuses responded by adding a children's car or two to the end of the trains and engaged in charitable acts which helped to solidify the appropriateness of the circus for all members of the family.

Tod Browning's *FREAKS!*

Tod Browning's 1932 film *Freaks* may have done more to damage the sideshow industry than any other factor. Browning chose for this film to use actual contemporary sideshow attractions as the stars of the film. Included in the cast were Prince Randian (the Living Torso), Johnny Eck (the Half Boy), and Pip and Zip (the Wild Aztec Children), among others. *Freaks*, however, was not the first film featuring sideshow acts. Lon Cheney made his living portraying such curiosities and monstrosities, and apparently, so long as the freaks were not real it was okay. When Browning portrayed actual freaks in his film, it was simply too real, and people were appalled. Because of the controversial nature of the film and its negative imagery, is that by the early 1930s, a shift had begun in the cultural perception of the disabled. The following decade would see films continue to present otherness in a monstrous form.



This is a short theatrical preview of Tod Browning's 1932 Film *Freaks*. In the early moments of the preview, as in with the film, the audience is introduced to the freaks and their abilities. We see the caring relationships and the sense of family in the freaks; we see their humanity, but in defense of their own, their turn monstrous.

Early American cinema, unfortunately for the freaks but in line with society, elected to portray freaks as monstrous. In addition to the films already mentioned, there are numerous more. There was, for example, James Whale's 1931 film adaptation of Mary Shelley's 1823 *Frankenstein: or, The Modern Prometheus*. An unexpected and ironic twist lies in the fact that, over time, Dr. Frankenstein's monster became known in popular culture as just Frankenstein. Considering that Frankenstein's monster was otherwise harmless, Dr. Frankenstein's twisted motivations become the social aberration as was likely Shelley's intent. In 1925 George Chesebro gave us one of many future werewolf films in his silent movie *Wolfblood: A Tale of the Forest*. Werewolves present a great example of otherness in that the human being has been forever changed into something other than human. Non-human blood courses through the werewolf's veins. The human presents no danger, but we must be wary of the dormant freak. To complete the triple-play of monstrosity, Tod Browning produced his adaptation of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* in 1931. Critics and trade insiders alike decried Browning's film, referring to it as a freak picture. Like the werewolf, vampires begin as victims. Enfeeblement is thrust upon them, socially and physically, and as a result, they become other than human. While Stoker's *Dracula* reveals the human side of Dracula and his capacity to love, his disability is such that society will never accept him. He will always invoke fear.

The freaks would emerge from their protagonist roles eventually, beginning in the 1940s, although slowly at first through superhero movies, where the freak is the savior. But the industry of television would begin to revive the freak and even expand what we consider "freakish" behavior.

THE RE-BIRTH: FREAKS IN CONTEMPORARY POP CULTURE

This research is not the first to draw the connection between the freak show and contemporary talk shows and reality-television programming. Some connections are simply too obvious to ignore. In many ways, the producers of these genres of television programming have drawn the same ire and criticism from elements of society as did the proprietors of freak shows.

Exploitation of Extreme Social Dysfunction and Personal Tragedy

In some instances, the comparisons are direct and undeniable, the most obvious being

AMC's *Freakshow* featuring the day to day operations of the Venice Beach Freakshow. While it is the exploitation of physical otherness taking place once again in this case, these genres have also served to broaden the pop-cultural definition of 'otherness' with their displays of extreme social and cultural dysfunction. "*How can a person look like that? Is that even real?*" has expanded to include "*How can a person act like that? This can't be real, can it?*" In either case, we cannot help but want to see for ourselves.



AMC's *Freakshow* – "What is Freakshow: Inside Freakshow" Published online February 6, 2013.

This clip is a promotional piece for AMC's *Freakshow*, a reality-based television program based off the real lives of actual sideshow performers in the iconic Venice Beach Freakshow.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GcETnbiz48A>

Click the link to watch - Video Length 4 min 21 Seconds

Use "back" button to return to the Exhibition

What then distinguishes the shameless huckster from the others? The answer depends upon what society considers exploitive, or at least distasteful exploitation. *Springer* is near-universally condemned in this regard. *Oprah*, among others, escape this criticism perhaps because their exploitive techniques are better disguised. The examination of two specific shows, one from *Jerry Springer* and another from *Geraldo* demonstrate that exploitation can be both obvious and disguised.



Cha-Cha Cheating" - The Jerry Springer Show (season 20, episode 49) as it aired November 19, 2010.

Little people become involved in a love triangle; a woman plans to make her boyfriend and his lover pay for their betrayal; a guest confesses that he has been sleeping with his friend's girlfriend.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k8A82E01mRI>

Click the link to watch - Video Length 2 min 51 Seconds

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The first example is from *The Jerry Springer Show* which aired the episode "Cha-Cha Cheating" in 2010. The episode features a little person who has appeared on the show to reveal to her best friend that she had an affair with her husband (both also little people). After confessing her sins during the stage interview, she and Jerry take a break and dance the "cha-cha" together before bringing out the "unsuspecting" friend and husband. To the glee of the studio audience, a completely organic and unscripted physical altercation erupted on stage. By all accounts, it would appear that this is a gaffed performance. It seems far too visual a feast to have been otherwise. Nonetheless, audiences find it entertaining and have come to expect such pageantry from *Springer*.

The comparative example is from the *Geraldo Rivera Show* which aired in 1991. In January of that year, a police officer named David Lunsford was killed by three men during a traffic stop. This case was the first time an in-

vehicle recording device captured a murder live. When fellow officers arrived at the scene, the equipment was still recording. All three men were arrested and sentenced for the crime.

Lunsford's widow later appeared on *Geraldo*. During the interview, the producers replayed the recording of her late husband's murder. Because his widow had not seen the footage herself, the producers ran the video with her face inset so that the audience could see her reaction to it. Of the two, Springer or Geraldo, which form of exploitation is better? What if we added a third?

The traditional circus sideshow is making a comeback.

The Contemporary Circus Sideshow!



Sideshow by the Seashore The Coney Island Circus Sideshow

The Coney Island Circus Sideshow is the last remaining, permanently housed circus sideshow where audiences can experience a traditional ten-in-one freak show. Dick Zygum founded Coney Island USA in 1980. His non-profit organization includes not only Sideshows by the Seashore (the official title), but also the Coney Island Museum, and the truly unique Sideshow School,

where anyone with the money and the desire can learn the sideshow tradecraft. As advertised on their website, students:...

...Learn Ancient Skills from the Very Best in the Business! Have you ever dreamed of running away with the circus? Did anyone ever call you a freak? Well, now's your chance to become one! At Coney Island USA's Sideshow School, you can learn how to hammer a 20-penny nail right into your skull and then paint a banner trumpeting your new career! You'll work with Professa Adam Realman to learn the ins and outs of the working acts of the sideshow.



Adam Realman, The Professa of the Sideshow School, demonstrates his sword-swallowing technique for students in 2017. Courtesy Coney Island USA.



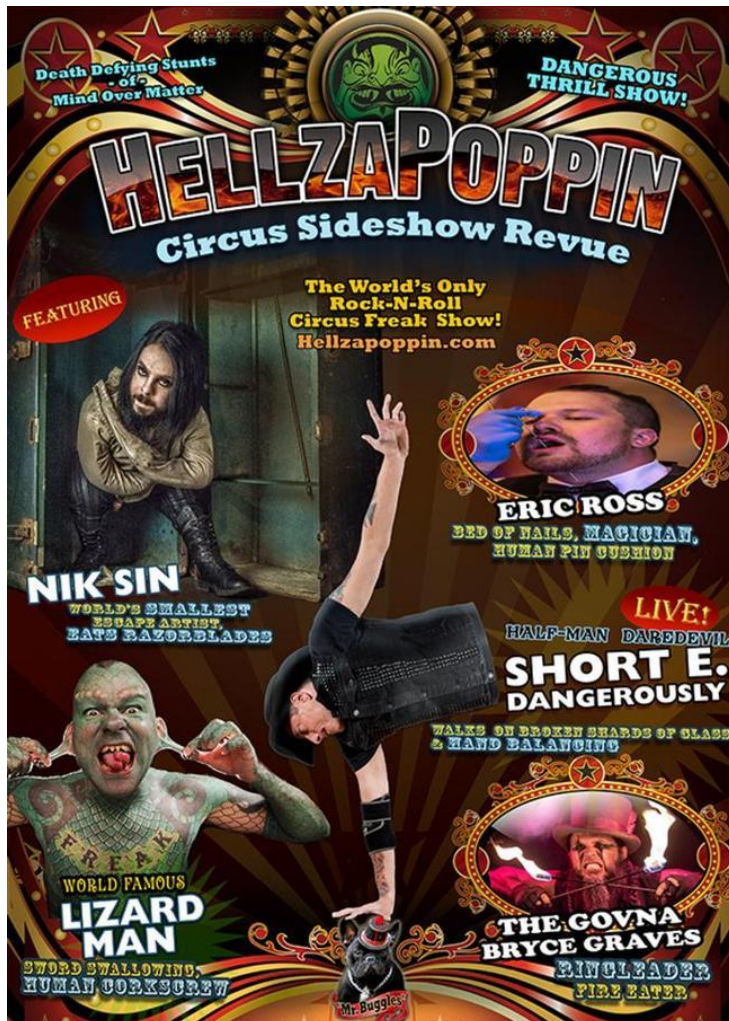
This 2018 promotion picture is of "Jelly Boy the Clown", a world-renowned sideshow performer and shock artist currently performing with the Coney Island Circus Sideshow. Courtesy Coney Island USA.

The school is only three days long, but upon completion, students will be prepared to enter the sideshow industry as performers trained in the following acts: The Basics of Fire Eating and Breathing and Fire Safety, Human Blockhead, The Fundamentals of Sword Swallowing, Bed of Nails, Stunts with Various Traps, Glass Walking, Blade Box, Electric Chair, and Snake Care. Graduates of the school are encouraged to perform on stage during their live shows.

In support of this research, the good folks at Coney Island USA arranged for an interview with their Sideshow School Professa, and veteran sideshow performer, Adam “Realman” Rinn. Adam, born and raised on Coney Island, has spent the last fifteen years perfecting his sideshow craft; his polished one-man show which includes sword swallowing, fire eating, glass walking, etc

The discussion turned to disability, and the unfairness of society to deny these performers their rights. Adam expressed a sentiment not unique in the industry, that it does not make sense to claim exploitation if those being exploited are doing so willingly. He acquiesced the point, as most do, that display of mental or cognitive disabilities can certainly fall into that

category because they may not have the capacity to make an informed decision; that in these circumstances it is easy to exploit. “You have to understand,” Adam said, “when the circus sideshows were employing freaks with disabilities, there weren’t other opportunities. There weren’t Walmart greeter positions at the time. If you weren’t institutionalized, you were likely in a sideshow.



2018 "Hellzapoppin' Promotional Flyer" featuring Nik Sinn, Eric Ross, Bryce "The Govna" Graves, Erik "The Lizardman" Sprague, and Short E. Dangerously.

Photo Courtesy Hellzapoppin' & Bryce "The Govna" Graves

HELLZAPOPPIN' - WHEN FREAKY ISN'T ENOUGH

Hellzapoppin' wants to make freak shows even freakier, employing the wildest acts out there. They call themselves “mavericks, trail-blazers, rebels, rule breakers, outlaws...true uninhibited artists”, and that it is through the sideshow that their passion is fueled. They differentiate themselves from other sideshows, producing a unique sideshow spinoff with their “ROCK-N-ROLL circus stunt-show” boasting the deadliest stunts in live entertainment, promising that spectators will witness “performances using the human anatomy and death-defying stunts of mind over matter, yet with no blood and no pain”. Hellzapoppin', a self-denoted “Vaudeville Freak Show of Wonder” also includes the standard feats and displays but with an edge, including: Fire Eating, Fire Breathing, The Bed of Nails, The Human Block-head, The Razor Sharp Machete Walk, Acrobatic Stunts, Glass Eating, Sword Swallowing, Knife Throwing & Archery using human targets, Illusion's like the Chinese Blade Box of Death, and

Human Oddities & Curiosities such as a real-live half-man who walks on his bare hands on broken shards of glass and much more.

Bryce “The Govna” Graves is the *freak* behind Hellzapoppin’ and continues to push his attractions to new levels. He created a new festival to be headlined by his Hellzapoppin’ troupe called the *Congregation of Sinners Incorporated*. By the description, Graves appears to be re-branding the promise of spectacle that the circus proclaimed, featuring his Hellzapoppin’, the Globe of Death Motorcycle Stunt Show, a motorcycle high-wire act, magicians, street performers, fortune tellers, old-time puppet shows, animal oddities, and carnival rides. Put them all together and you get “The Greatest Show in Hell”. Erik “The lizardman” Sprague is a performer on tour with Hellzapoppin’ who agreed to be



Erik Sprague on becoming "The Lizardman" - Produced by AoL as part of their "You've Got..." series of pop-culture clips. Originally published online September 28, 2012

In this episode, Erik Sprague, the famous reptilian performance artist and sideshow freak talks about his transformation and what it was like to be honored by Ripley's Believe It or Not.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7tj4zScXrAY&t=2s>

Click the link to watch - Video Length
1 min 34 Seconds

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interviewed for this research. He laughed at Graves’ choice of a tagline, saying that it is “as in-your-face as you can get” which is entirely the point.

The Lizardman (Sprague) is the ultimate expression of a self-made freak, having had his body surgically altered for effect. In addition to his full body tattoo art, Sprague had his tongue surgically bifurcated, and Teflon implants placed in his forehead, completing his reptilian look (see figure...). As a child, Sprague loved the *Godzilla* films, and decided to become what he saw as beautiful. Sprague insists that his “was a calculated decision to exploit things I knew drew fascination. An attempt to not just create something fascinating but to be something fascinating. My success is an indication of how accurate my ideas about what fascinates people were/are.” This is a statement that might as well have come out of P.T. Barnum’s mouth.



Photo courtesy Hellzapoppin' & Bryce "The Govna" Graves"

Bryce "The Govna" Graves" is an American producer, creator, director, master of ceremonies, and sideshow stuntman in the entertainment industry. The leader of Hellzapoppin', Graves seeks always to push the limits; to make freaks even freakier!

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