

THE FREAK AND 'DISABLED' MULTICULTURALITY

Elisa Bordin

Ca' Foscari University, Venice

ABSTRACT

Differently from positive visions of multiculturalism as the richness of American diversity, in this essay I tackle 'negative multiculturalism' as one of the elements of the category of the freak, where cultural, ethnic and racial difference coincided with disability, all concocting to fence off diversity in American society. I understand the freak as a field for multicultural criticism because of its recruitment processes, as evidenced by the case of the Italian Tocci brothers, but also as a place of confinement and exoticization of the American citizen who, as a consequence of disability, came to inhabit a transnational category used to police concepts of 'normal' masculinity and femininity. In this reading, multiculturalism is understood as a fabrication that veils processes of enfreakment.

Keywords: Freak, Disability, Tocci Brothers, Conjoined Twins, Negative Multiculturalism.

In the perceived deficiency of the Other, each perceives—without knowing it—the falsity of his/her own subject position.

(Slavoj Žižek, *The Universal Exception*, 2006, 160)

In *The Golden Door* (2006), director Emanuele Crialese tells the story of the Italian Mancuso family and their migration to the United States. After dreaming of America as a land of milk and honey, once they have crossed the Atlantic Ocean the family have to face the examinations of Ellis Island, the port of entry to the United States for European migrants, and the 'scientific' interpretation of immigrant bodies as potentially deviant. In that in-between space, functioning as a sort of limen where migrants, although physically in the US, continue to inhabit their Old World identity, the Italian family must undergo a series of abusive examinations that reveal the implicit discrimination of scientific and objective readings of culturally different bodies.

The film partly anticipates noteworthy studies such as the ones by Douglas Baynton (2016), David A. Gerber (2005), and Jay Dolmage (2011), on how categories like ethnicity and race have historically been constructed in a constant dialogue with

notions of disability. As these studies show, disability and race/ethnicity have been mutually constructed, one providing evidence of the other and thus creating a vicious circle of marginalization and discrimination. This was especially so in the last decades of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, when disability, or just ugliness, imposed on immigrant bodies was part of a wider discussion on the American character and the acceptability of migrants in the fabric of the nation. I combine here research on disability, ethnicity or race, and migration with freak studies. While classic works such as Leslie Fiedler's *Freaks* (1978) or Robert Bogdan's *Freak Show* (1988) have mainly investigated the psychological meaning of such a figure or how freak shows functioned, scant critical work has been done on "the ways in which the categories of race/ethnicity and disability are used to constitute one another or the ways that those social, political, and cultural practices have kept seemingly different groups of people in strikingly similar marginalized position" (James and Wu 2006, 4).¹ This work situates itself at the intersection of Disability and Cultural Studies and aims at shedding light on how the freak has functioned as a multicultural repository of ethnic/racial, physical, and cultural difference, supporting other systems of exclusion.

The 'disabling' reading the Mancuso family undergo in *The Golden Door* is not what the Tocci brothers probably experienced once they arrived in the United States in 1891 (fig. 1). Despite their "extraordinary body," to use the expression popularized by disability scholar Rosemarie Garland Thomson (1996), they were rather welcomed as stars. Giacomo and Giovanni Battista (also spelled Baptista) were born in Locana, Piedmont, in 1877, although they are also reported to be from Sardinia or Lucania, today's region of Basilicata (Gould and Pyle 1896; Calvino 1980). They were the first children of their parents and their mother was 19 when she gave birth to the brothers.

¹ Baynton 2016, Gerber 2005, and Dolmage 2011, quoted at the beginning of this essay, offer of course interesting innovations. See also James and Wu 2006. For an overview of the development of freak studies, see Samuels 2011, 56.



Figure 1. Advertisement for the Tocchi Brothers, produced during their touring of the U.S. (Science Museum Group, Wellcome Library)

Their notoriety in freak shows is due to their being one of the few cases in history of *dicephalus tetrabrachius* conjoined twins reaching maturity, that is, the most long-lived example of two persons with one single set of legs, 2 torsos, two heads and four arms. They “each had a well-formed head, perfect arms, and a perfect thorax to the sixth rib,” where their torsos came together; they also shared “a common abdomen, a single anus, two legs, two sacra, two vertebral columns, one penis, but three buttocks, the central one containing a rudimentary anus” (Gould and Pyle 1896). According to medical reports of the time, they were clever boys, with different characters, “their sensations and emotions ... distinctly individual and independent” (Gould and Pyle 1896). They never walked, because of an absence of mutual control on their limbs, because of one of the twins’ club foot or, more probably, because of the daily exposition they were forced to endure since they were one month old, which prevented the development of a proper leg musculature.

The brothers' parents were the first to enroll the twins in the sideshow business. They were first exhibited in Turin and exposed to audiences in other Italian cities, Austria, France, Germany, Poland, and Switzerland. After a career as human curiosities in Europe, they moved to the US at the beginning of the 1890s. They were to remain just one year, but eventually spent five in the country. In New York, they exhibited for at least three weeks, making about 1000 \$ a week, an incredible amount of money which qualified them as the most-paid freaks of the industry of the time (*Circus Scrap Book*, quoted in Adams 2001, 256). They later traveled and exhibited in Boston, Philadelphia, and cities of the Eastern coast. They were sensational, so much so that Mark Twain originally modeled on them the characters of the Italian brothers in "Those Extraordinary Twins," a short story deriving from the material originally gathered for *Pudden'head Wilson* (1893). Inspired by the billboards sponsoring one of the Toccis' American shows, Twain transformed the original Italian conjoined brothers into the aristocratic Luigi and Angelo, a tragicomic version of the Toccis and an evidence of the American writer's fascination for the double. When about twenty, no longer under their father's jurisdiction and after accumulating a solid sum of money, the brothers retired, passing from the transnational experiences of their first twenty years, to the extreme locality of the rest of their lives: they bought a villa near Venice and lived there till the end of their days. The date of their death is unknown, as well as how they lived.²

In spite of the fame they enjoyed during their lifetime, the Toccis remain unacknowledged in studies of Italian Americana, despite its attempt to inclusively pluralize American past and culture by reclaiming a specific Italian American archive. Their story is simply unregistered in the history of the Italian diaspora.³ Notwithstanding their invisibility in such an archive, the Toccis emerge elsewhere, in studies about the freak and alongside a group of 'multicultural subjects' differently

² Some report they married and had children, others that they died alone. Jan Bondeson estimates they lived at least till they were 34 (2001).

³ The only contemporary documentation of the Tocci brothers in Italian is a short reference in an essay by Italo Calvino, entitled "Il museo dei mostri di cera" (The museum of wax monsters, 1980), published in the collection *Collezione di sabbia*. In this essay, the writer/journalist describes his visit to the "Grand Musée anatomique-ethnologique du Dr. P. Spitzner," an itinerary exhibition showing wax statues of the brothers, aged 9.

informed by varying degrees of disability. It is this triangulation of ethnic or racial otherness, disability, and ‘negative multiculturalism’ that I aim at investigating here. Why are the Toccis invisible in the archive of Italian Americana, that division supporting ‘American multiculturalism’ that is supposed to contain them? And why do they emerge somewhere else?

In an article appeared on the *Scientific American* of December 1891, exactly when the Tocci arrived in the United States, the brothers are compared to the most famous American conjoined twins of all times, Chang and Eng (1811-1874), the original Siamese twins (fig. 2). Born in today’s Thailand of Chinese ancestry, they were ‘discovered’ by the merchant Robert Hunter in 1824, sold in the US, and they later became American citizens, eventually marrying a couple of white English sisters and adopting the surname Bunker. Their bill name became a common term to indicate conjoined twins, and has remained largely so even today; because of them, the word *Siamese* (literally, from the country of Siam) has come to indicate disability, stressing the imbrications of cultural/racial/linguistic and bodily difference and ideas of nationality, as I will later highlight.⁴ In that same 1891 article, the Toccis are compared to the ‘Hungarian sisters’ Helena and Judith (1701-1723), and the ‘South Carolina negresses’ Millie and Christine McKoy (fig. 3). The same happens in Gould and Pyle’s *Anomalies and Curiosities of Medicine* (1886), in which the Toccis are described together with Ritta-Cristina from Sassari, Italy, and Chang and Eng.⁵ This referential group is again found in other studies, such as Fiedler controversial *Freaks* (1978), in which the cultural critic devotes some pages to the Italian conjoined twins, mentioning them alongside the African American Millie-Christine sisters, Chang and Eng, and the white American Daisy and Violet Hilton, famous for their participation in Tom Browning’s *Freaks* (1932). An equally comparative approach is found in Jan Bondeson’s 2001 essay, where the brothers are

⁴ As was the case for the Toccis, Chang and Eng came to be the subject of a sketch by Mark Twain, “Personal Habits of the Siamese Twins” (1869). On them, see Grosz (1996, 62), Fiedler (1978, 222), Orser 2014, Wu 2008 and 2012, and Pingree 1996.

⁵ The same group is again used in an article of 1902 appeared in *The American Naturalist*, in which the couples of conjoined twins are invoked to study the anatomy of double calves.

discussed across time and spatial and national differences, together with other 'wonders' such as the 375 AD 2-headed boy, the Scottish conjoined brothers at the court of King James IV of Scotland, the "Fair Maiden of Foscott" (16th century), dicephalic twins from Bavaria and Switzerland (16th century), and, eventually, the Turkish archer/s of the 17th century. Across critical history, then, the Toccis seem to occupy just one space, that of the 'multicultural' freak. There appears to be, in other words, a precise 'multicultural' archive of conjoined twins, which has, however, never been recuperated in the critical debate multicultural studies has usually reserved for its subjects.



Figure 2. Chang and Eng Bunker, the 'original' Siamese twins (Wikimedia Commons)

Similar to the silence around the Toccis in Italian American Studies is the case of Millie-Christine McKoy, as researched by Ellen Samuel. The black conjoined sisters were born into slavery in North Carolina in 1851 and traveled the world performing as the "Two-Headed Nightingale." Despite the popularity the McKoys enjoyed, Samuel laments an almost absolute lack of consideration within African American Studies (2011, 54). Theirs, as well as the Toccis', is a case of critical silence from the part of those agents for multiculturalism that surprises, especially considering that "no public Black figure

exacerbated corporeal definitions of legitimacy, pushed the boundaries of identity authenticity, and ran the gamut of representational ambiguity more than these Carolina twins” (Brooks 2007, 308). While the small number of conjoined twins may explain the necessity of grouping them together, the absence of other references in their specific ethnic/racial field induces interrogations. Why, in other words, do the Toccis or Millie-Christine continue to exist only in the discursive multiculturalism of the freak, whereas the different groups advocating for the pluralistic representation of American society have ignored them? Aristotle used the term *lusus naturae*, freaks of nature (Fiedler 1978, 239), to describe similar groups of people, as if their body were supreme, outstanding other identitarian categories. According to disability scholars David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, the body as the category that surpasses any other possible identitarian model is exactly “the ‘real’ stigma of a disability” (2000, 33), which operates a reduction on the possible cultural readings of such bodies. The depletion of multiple reading lenses in favor of the ‘bodily’ one is the cardinal principle of the so-called *enfreakment* (Hevey 1992), a process occurring when “the body envelops and obliterates the freak’s potential humanity” (Garland Thomson 1997, 59) and the analytical categories we generally use to describe, perceive, and categorize it. In this sense, disability has an “unambiguous ability to impact every other identity category at any time” (Mitchell and Snyder 2000, x): disability, and especially forms of extreme physical disability such as conjoined twins, trumps other identitarian status because, “Although the components of freakishness change with time, the centrality of the body remains a constant and determining feature of the freak’s identity” (Adams 2001, 6).



Figure 3. Millie and Christine McKoy
(Collection of Robert E. Green, John H.
Fitzgibbon, St. Louis, 1867)

The category of race/ethnicity therefore vanishes: white Americans like Daisy and Violet Hilton, black Americans like Millie-Christine, Asians like Eng and Chang, and Italians like the Tocci brothers, are all pigeonholed into a 'negative' multicultural class, that is, that of 'freaks,' with no analytical references to any other signifying class. This creates the assumption that disability is natural, so visible and extraordinary that one does not need to question the cultural construction of it. The enfreakment process deforms thus the value of otherwise reclaimed differences, and the freak becomes a capacious category, which includes physical, psychical, but also geographical and cultural marginalities. It functions as a multicultural repository of otherness: the freak provides an ample and apparently 'natural' spectrum of diversity, oblivious of the regulations imposed by ideas of humanity and citizenship which, in the specific space and time where the Toccis performed, that is, the turn-of-the-century US, combined notions of ableness, the fascination for exoticism, and narrations of multiculturalism.

As a matter of fact, the silence of multicultural criticism with regards to its ‘freak’ subjects mirrors the historical process of enfreakment these people were subject to. The end of the 19th century, when the Tocci came to work in the US, marked a turning point in American cultural, national, and ‘bodily’ politics, during which the ‘multicultural freak’ functioned as a category in contrast with normalizing ideas of Americanness and the requirements of the ideology of the melting-pot. Processes of enfreakment, and their exposition in sideshows and freak shows, did create a possible transnational and multicultural space, but not in the positive terms of inclusion with which multiculturalism has recently been employed in the US.

If migration, together with the prospect of national diversity it implies, has always been specific features of the United States, the bulk of the phenomenon at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century impinged problematically on American society, with peaks of open opposition to that prospective multiculturalism leading to the quota system of 1924. Historian Gail Bederman (1995) explains how, at the end of the 19th century, as ideas of Americanness were anxiously changing and being questioned, the nation became increasingly captivated by ideas of the body, its efficiency or recreation. In the second half of the 19th century new fears became palpable when the plurality of American democracy was perceived as imperiled by the hordes of ‘unassimilable’ new Americans. This is when the American body’s manliness, efficiency, and adequate physical appearance came to be considered attributes of proper citizenship—a category which, however, was not inclusive enough to accommodate the “extraordinary body” within the conceptual limits of the nation. It is in those years that freak shows gained momentum, providing an entertaining—and little risky—arena for America’s interest in the body, the exotic, and dis/abledness, and projections of civic inclusion or its absence. The popularity of the freak show, throughout the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th,⁶ is evidence of this preoccupation with the body as a ‘site’ for discussing national difference. As such, freak shows constituted a “cultural ritual

⁶ Sideshows and freak shows were popular in the Western world between the 1820s and 1940s, when the discussion on the “extraordinary body” was definitely confined within medical discourse (Garland Thomson 1996b, 4; 1997).

that dramatized the era's physical and social hierarchy by spotlighting bodily stigmata that could be choreographed as an absolute contrast to 'normal' American embodiment and authenticated as corporeal truth" (Garland Thompson 1997, 63). While American society was struggling to come to terms with its *de facto* multiculturalism, it fabricated in the form of freak shows a safe arena where attraction to and repulsion from physical, racial/ethnic, and cultural difference veils the show's highly cultural function as a reinforcement of normative ideas of Americanness.

The beginning of Western freak shows is usually considered London's Bond Street's exposition of Tono Maria in 1822. There she was billed "the Venus of South America," her multiply scarred body functioning as a visual anomaly but also as a mark of the cultural diversity of South American femininity. The woman's sexual 'transgression' was marked on her body, scarred each time she committed adultery (Garland Thomson 1997, 55). In the United States, "free enterprise and the rise of a democratized and fluid middle class fostered the proliferation of exhibitions like Tono Maria's in institutionalized shows" (1997, 56), which came to include stars like the 'ape woman' Julia Pastrana, the dwarf General Tom Thumb, or Chang the Chinese Giant, alongside conjoined twins, tattooed and bearded women, extremely fat people, and a number of persons we would hardly define as 'freaks' today. They performed as curiosities, a visual rendition of human difference and limits which aroused an intermingling sentiment of "affection and will to dominate" in the spectators (Gerber 1996, 43).

Such forms of entertainment were highly ambivalent, because in their offering central stage to physical diversity they transformed human variety into a source of attraction, an object of exploitation, and a target of derision and exclusion at the same time. As "simultaneously and compulsively fascinating and repulsive, enticing and sickening," the figure of the freak was in fact usually perceived as "an *ambiguous* being whose existence imperils categories and oppositions dominant in social life" (Grosz 1996, 56-57) and, as such, enters into dialog with broader discourses that lie outside the freak's body. Their differently created extraordinary bodies, when exposed in sideshows, established with the spectators a relationship of deviancy and normalcy which

coincided with the desire of mastery of the national expansion and imperialism of the time, the related scientific racism, and Victorian ideals of masculinity and femininity.⁷ In other words, the freak show served as a form of visual representation which marked, as a contrastive example, female and male ‘normalcy,’ as well as Americanness. As the counterpart to mainstream definitions of Victorian masculinity and femininity, sideshows therefore contributed to police interpretations of humanity, in which multiculturalism coincided with monstrosity. The category of the freak worked hence as a sort of visual and cultural enclosure, confining different forms of human diversity and functioning as a microcosm of multiculturalism for both its performers and its viewers while policing ideas of Americanness.

The extent to which the figure of the freak worked to discursively and imaginatively expel diversity from American society is evident if we consider the fabrication of its multiculturalism. The multiculturalism of the freak show is indeed not just a matter of a forced coexistence of people coming from different cultural milieus in the name of the predominance of their body. In other words, the freak show was multicultural not only because the Chinese Chang, the African American Millie-Christine, or the Italian Toccis coexisted in a same working environment and, often, living environment—see, in this regard, the rendition of a freak circus life in Browning’s *Freaks*. Cultural diversity was also a typical feature of the narratives used to create the freaks, the stars of the shows. Bogdan and Barbora Putova reconstruct the history of the American freak show and, especially, of its patron P.T. Barnum, “the apotheosis of the American entrepreneurship,” the person who single-handedly “brought the freak show to its pinnacle in the nineteenth century by capitalizing on America’s hunger for extravagance, knowledge, and mastery” (Garland Thomson 1997, 58). Barnum flirted with the idea of a ‘multicultural’ show throughout his life, from the 1840s briefly after starting his career as a showman, when he envisioned a “Congress of Nations” (Putova 2018, 96) till his “Grand Ethnological Congress” of the 1880s, a touring act that exhibited

⁷ On the possible social functions of freak shows, see Gerber (1996, 44) and Garland Thomson (1997, 58); on ideas of American masculinity, see Kimmel (1994), Rotundo (1993), and Bederman (1995).

persons from all over the world. His idea of showcasing diversity, therefore, although including white Americans such as Tom Thumb (1838-1883) or giantess Anna Swan (1846), had specifically to do with visual as well as cultural diversity.

Barnum's freaks' stage-personas were created alternatively out of disability, racial difference, or culture-turned-visual difference. His first success, Joice Heth, is a clear example of how disability, racial diversity and cultural value coincided in the creation of the freak. As the black, blind, and paralyzed supposed nurse of George Washington, Heth's freakiness was primarily a matter of narration—her being Washington's nurse, and therefore very old—which could be sold as true because of the simultaneity of blackness and disability. But Barnum's and his public's flirtation with multiculturalism can be traced in a number of other stage personalities like fu-Hum-Me, the Native American dancer, the Fiji mermaid, or Maximo and Bartola, a couple of microcephalic siblings originally from Salvador who performed in the 1860s, to name just a few.

As the word *performing* hints at, the freak show was not only about exposition—moments for gazing, staring at physical difference—but was a more complex spectacle that included narrative moments serving as a way to wrap disability with notions the public perceived as fascinating yet repulsive. In his examination of how the freak show functioned, Bogdan explains that “showmen fabricated freaks' back-grounds, the nature of their condition, the circumstances of their current lives, and other personal characteristics. The accurate story of the life and conditions of those being exhibited was replaced by purposeful distortion designed to market and exhibit, to produce a more appealing freak” (1996, 25). The Salvadoran siblings Máximo and Bartola, for example, were nicknamed “the Aztec Children” or “the Last of the Ancient Aztecs.” Their physical and geographical difference was further modified culturally as a strategy “to achieve more publicity” (Putova 2018, 95). The same is the case with Jo-Jo, the “Dog-Faced Man,” born Fedor Jefichew, who performed in the United States in the 1880s. Putova asserts “Barnum increased the attractiveness of his origin with a story according to which Fedor was found by a hunter as a wild man in a cave in the deep woods in the central part of Russia” (2018, 96). In these cases, disability matches national otherness,

and becomes saleable and profitable when in conjunction with other narrations of diversity, a link that speaks to a typically imperialist interest for exotica. The human variety of the freak show thus shows how disability and racial/ethnic and cultural difference were chained together in the show's very specific acts; disability, racial/ethnic and cultural difference constituted a continuum of otherness that stood as a 'negatively multicultural' Americanness, pigeonholing everything unwelcome within notions of national citizenship into a static, ethnically exoticized category.

The policing function of the freak's multiculturalism comes even more plainly to the forefront if one considers that sideshows were also spaces for 'performed' expulsion for certain American-born subjects. This is the case, for example, of the so-called Wild Men of Borneo, born Hiram W. and Barney Davis (1825-1912) in Knox County, Ohio, two mentally disabled brothers who suffered from a form of dwarfism. Or of Zip the Pinhead (1857-1926), an African American microcephalic man born in New Jersey with the name of William Johnson. His performance was accompanied by a story about his origin that denied his Americanness in favor of a mythic African origin:

It was captured by a party of adventurers who were in search of the gorilla. While exploring the river Gambia, near its mouth, they fell in with a race of beings never before discovered. They were six in number. They were in a PERFECTLY NUDE STATE, roving about among the trees and branches, in the manner common to the monkey and orang outang. ... The present one is the only survivor. (quoted in Lindfors 2014, 167)

Zip the Pinhead was exhibited (and therefore attractive) both for his physical impairment and for the story of his character, which provided evidence of the 'missing link,' that is, the unknown specimens testifying human descent from apes. Disabled and racialized people alike were then "depicted as evolutionary laggards or throwbacks" with respect to the white race (Bayton 2016, 36), their Americanness easily dismissed through narrative and cultural relocation.

Zip and the Wild Men of Borneo, just to cite a couple of the many more numerous possible examples, show the curiosity about physical anomaly, as well as a hunger for exotica which American imperialism was making available in the US. And, what is more interesting in my reading, they provide an exemplary case of narrative

dislocation, which moved US-born disability outside the limits of the nation via ideas of “racial otherness.” By narratively expelling physical or psychological difference out of Americanness, and placing it within a performative cultural and national otherness, the freak show thus repositioned American disability within the field of the exotic/national other. The assortment of real or counterfeited non-US diversity in freak shows was in this sense “not intended as a cross-cultural experience to provide patrons with real knowledge of the ways of life and thinking of a foreign group of people” (Putova 2018, 95). Rather, the cultural ritual of freak shows “provided dilemmas of classification and definition upon which the throng of spectators could hone the skills needed to tame world and self in the ambitious project of American self-making” (Garland Thomson 1997, 59). In the cases of these extreme bodies, such as the Davis brothers’ or Johnson’s, cultural difference was fabricated in order to draw the line of what was to be performatively included and excluded from the United States, reinscribing local disabilities as “cultural exoticism” and expressions of foreignness. The Salvadoran Maximo and Bartola, the Italian Tocci Brothers, the Russian Jo-Jo and the ‘African’ Zip, came in this way to be part of the same discursive community, the ‘multicultural’ freak, a rendition of difference in a safe entertaining show format aimed at exorcising the intimidating changes American society was facing. In it, the disabled body and cultural and ethnic/racial otherness are linked in ambivalent ways, and trigger a reflection on how multiculturalism associated with disability functioned as a tool of exclusion.

The regimentation of American bodies—from the freak to the practices of admission at Ellis Island mentioned at the beginning of this essay (Dolmage 2011)—raises doubts about the compatibility of diversity and Americanness. The list could be longer and include the physical annihilation of Native Americans, the abuse of black bodies, the legal prohibition of miscegenation, all showing a fear of an opening to bodily diversity. This is even more evident if we think of how, at the end of the 19th century, the culture of physical fitness started to become more and more central in American culture also thanks to figures such as Eugen Sandow and Charles Atlas, two champions of American masculinity whose immigrant status has been whitewashed. Born Angelo Siciliano in Cosenza, Italy, Charles Atlas was one of the first American body-builders.

An Italian migrant to the US—where he arrived when he was about 10—Atlas was the winner of the “America’s Most Handsome Man” contest in 1921; as the creator of the Dynamic Tension program for body-builders, he became a renowned personality at a time when “Italian immigrants’ whiteness was probationary and their racial difference uncontested” (Reich 2010, 445). Despite Italian Americans’ uncertain racial status, Atlas’ “perfect” body allowed immediate assimilation to the category of the ‘American,’ thus transcending his racial background (453). Whereas American disabled people were de-Americanized through the freak performance, Atlas was ‘de-otherized’ because of the ableness of his body, functional to discourses of American masculinity.

The comparison between Atlas’s inclusion as a performer of exemplar masculinity despite his original otherness, as opposed to the exclusion of native others and their consequent inscription within freak multiculturalism, highlights the centrality of disability in definitions of Americanness. While positive multiculturalism presupposes a “politics of representation and recognition within a national frame” (Chandra 2008, 834), the multiculturalism of the freak, in history and in critical discourse, functions as a closet for undesired subjects, a fluid category of un-Americanness, possible by the obstructing enfreaking power of the disabled body, a category that overcomes other possible interpretive paradigms by downgrading national, ethnic, or gendered readings and imposing itself as a transnational and negative multicultural category. Contrary to the ‘perfect’ Atlas, the Italian Toccis, the Asian American Chang and Eng, and the African American Millie and Christine belonged to the deviant and multicultural side of the spectrum of human variety. Their disability, while physical, also testifies to how the discourse on the freak has worked as a cultural mechanism used to segregate physical otherness into a negative discourse of multiculturalism opposed to Americanness. Rather than an ephemeral form of amusement, the freak performed then “important cultural work by allowing ordinary people to confront, and master, the most extreme and terrifying forms of Otherness they could imagine” (Adams 2001, 2).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Adam, Rachel. 2001. *Sideshow U.S.A.: Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Bayton, Douglas. 2016. *Defectives in the Land: Disability and Immigration in the Age of Eugenics*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Bederman, Gail. 1996. *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Bogdan, Robert. 1988. *The Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Bogdan, Robert. 1996. "The Social Construction of Freaks." In *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, edited by Rosemarie Garland Thomson, 23-37. New York and London: New York University Press.
- Bondeson, Jan. 2001. "Dicephalus Conjoined Twins." *Journal of Pediatric Surgery* 36, no. 9 (September): 1435-44.
- Brooks, Daphne. 2007. "Fraudulent Bodies/Fraught Methodologies." *Legacy* 24, no. 2:306-314.
- Browning, Tod. 1932. *Freaks*.
- Calvino, Italo. 1980 (1984). "Il museo dei mostri di cera." *Collezione di sabbia*, 28-34. Milano: Mondadori.
- Chandra, Sarika. 2008. "Re-Producing a Nationalist Literature in the Age of Globalization: Reading (Im)migration in Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost their Accents*." *American Quarterly* 60, no. 3:829-50.
- "Chang and Eng Bunker." Wikimedia Commons. Accessed March 13, 2021. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:ChangandEng.jpg>.
- Dolmage, Jay. 2011. "Disabled upon Arrival: The Rhetorical Construction of Disability at Ellis Island." *Cultural Critique* 11:24-69.
- Fiedler, Leslie. 1978 (1981). *Freaks. Mostri o mutanti, scherzo di natura, incubi viventi, incarnazione delle nostre paure, caricature delle nostre illusioni*. Translated by Ettore Capriolo. Milano: Garzanti.
- Garland Thomson, Rosemarie, editor. 1996a. *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*. New York and London: New York University Press.
- Garland Thomson, Rosemarie. 1996b. "Introduction: From Wonder to Error – A Genealogy of Freak Discourse in Modernity." In *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the*

Elisa Bordin |

Extraordinary Body, edited by Rosemarie Garland Thomson, 1–19. New York and London: New York University Press.

Garland Thomson, Rosemarie. 1997. *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Gerber, David A. 1996. “The ‘Careers’ of People Exhibited in Freak Shows: The Problem of Volition and Valorization.” In *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, edited by Rosemarie Garland Thomson, 38–54. New York and London: New York University Press.

Gerber, David A. 2009. “Comment: Immigration History and Disability History.” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 28, no. 3 (Spring):49–53.

Gould, George M. and Walter Lytle Pyle. 1896. *Anomalies and Curiosities of Medicine*. Web resource. U.S. National Library of Medicine. Accessed March 15, 2021. <https://collections.nlm.nih.gov/catalog/nlm:nlmuid-57221200R-bk>.

Grosz, Elizabeth. 1996. “Intolerable Ambiguity: Freaks as/at the Limit.” In *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, edited by Rosemarie Garland Thomson, 55–66. New York and London: New York University Press.

Hartzman, Marc. 2006. *American Sideshow: An Encyclopedia of History’s Most Wondrous and Curiously Strange Performers*. New York: TarcherPerigree.

Hevey, David. 1992. *The Creatures Time Forgot: Photography and Disability Imagery*. London: Routledge.

Hosborn, Henry Leslie. 1902. “The Anatomy of a Double Calf.” *The American Naturalist* 428:601–603.

James, Jennifer, and Cynthia Wu. 2006. “Editors’ Introduction: Race, Ethnicity, Disability, and Literature: Intersections and Interventions.” *MELUS* 31, no. 3:3–13.

Kimmel, Michael. 1994. “Consuming manhood: The feminization of American culture and the recreation of the male body, 1832–1920.” *Michigan Quarterly Review* 33, no.1:7–36.

Lindfors, Bernth. 2014. *Early African Entertainments Abroad: From the Hottentot Venus to Africa’s First Olympians*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

“Millie and Christine McKoy.” 1867. Collection of Robert E. Green, John H. Fitzgibbon, St. Louis.

Mitchell, David T., and Sharon L. Snyder. 2000. *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.

Orser, Joseph Andrew. 2014. *The Lives of Chang and Eng: Siam's Twins in Nineteenth-Century America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Pingree, Allison. 1996. "America's 'United Siamese Brothers': Chang and Eng and Nineteenth-Century Ideologies of Democracy and Domesticity." In *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, edited by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, 92–114. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Putova, Barbora. 2018. "Freak Shows: Otherness Of The Human Body As A Form Of Public Presentation." *Anthropologie* LVI, no. 2:91–102.

Reich, Jaqueline. 2010. "'The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man': Charles Atlas, Physical Culture, and the Inscription of American Masculinity." *Men and Masculinities* 12, no. 4:444–61.

Rotundo, Anthony E. 1993. *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era*. New York: Basic Books.

Samuels, Ellen. 2011. "Examining Millie and Christine McKoy: Where Enslavement and Enfreakment Meet." *Signs* 37, no.1:53–81.

Twain, Mark. 1894 (2004). "Those Extraordinary Twins." In *Pudden'head Wilson*, 227–303. New York, Penguin.

Wellcome Collection. "Advertisement for the Tocci Brothers, produced during their touring of the US." Science Museum Group. Accessed March 14. <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/hjidxcze>

Wu, Cynthia. 2008. "The Siamese Twins in Late-Nineteenth-Century Narratives of Conflict and Reconciliation." *American Literature* 80, no.1:29–55.

Wu, Cynthia. 2012. *Chang and Eng Reconnected: The Original Siamese Twins in American Culture*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Untitled article. *Scientific American* (December). Accessed March 15, 2021. <http://twain.lib.virginia.edu/wilson/toccitwn.html>.

Žižek, Slavoj. 2006. *The Universal Exception: Selected Writings*. London and New York: Continuum.

Elisa Bordin is Assistant Professor of American Literature and Culture at Ca' Foscari University, Venice, Italy. Her research deals with the western, a genre she analyses in her monograph *Masculinity & Westerns: Regenerations at the Turn of the Millennium* (2014); the literatures of minorities and of migration, with a special focus on Italian-American and Chicano literature; critical race studies, and especially the memory of slavery. On this topic, she edited *Transatlantic Memories of Slavery: Remembering the*

Elisa Bordin |

Past, Changing the Future (2015, with Anna Scacchi) and *A fior di pelle. Bianchezza, nerezza, visualità* (2017, with Stefano Bosco). In 2019 she published *Un'etnicità complessa. Negoziazioni identitarie nelle opere di John Fante*; she is now working on a book on the "global Igbo" writer Chris Abani, and in general, the so-called "new African diaspora" in the United States. She is a member of the editorial board of *Ácoma. Rivista internazionale di studi nordamericani* and *Iperstoria. Testi, letterature, linguaggi*, and is Managing Editor of *From the European South: A Transdisciplinary Journal of Postcolonial Humanities*. Email: elisa.bordin@unive.it