Neo-Victorian Negotiations of Agency and Disability: Review of Helen Davies, *Neo-Victorian Freakery*: *The Cultural Afterlife of the Victorian Freak Show*

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Helen Davies, ***Neo-Victorian Freakery: The Cultural Afterlife of the Victorian Freak Show***
Houndmills, Basingstoke & New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015
ISBN: 978-1-137-40255-4 £ 58

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This 2015 monograph continues to be a timely intervention in neo-Victorian studies. Helen Davies's *Neo-Victorian Freakery: The Cultural Afterlife of the Victorian Freak Show* applies the vibrant and burgeoning field of disability studies to analyse what is generally termed Victorian 'freakery' and freak shows and their contemporary adaptations and appropriations in mainly biofictional fiction, non-fiction and film.

Helen Davies takes her cue from the established metaphor of the mirror image for neo-Victorianism's envisaging of the nineteenth-century past to focus on the inevitable distortions such cultural re-imaginings entail. She asks in what way our relationship to the past is reflected by the visual regimes enacted in the freak show, drawing on Lacanian psychosemiotics to illuminate (neo-)Victorian identity constructions of normative and non-normative bodies. The combination of Lacan's mirror stage with disability studies provides a fresh take on these well-established approaches.[1] In addition, Davies draws on Kate Mitchell's notion of memory as a re-*member*ing of the past, and hence as a process of re-articulating its quasi-bodily remains in textual and visual forms. Akin to re-vision, such re-articulations may entail new assemblies, new constellations from the point of view of the present, and thus also new forms of othering. Consequently, historical subjects once othered as 'freaks' lend themselves particularly well

to exploring the fraught ethical dimensions of the process of neo-Victorian re-membering, as non-normative bodies once more become objects of consumption.

In this context, Davies draws on an argument put forth by Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn: many neo-Victorian novels enact "a slippage between […] a physical body and a textual corpus" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 108), so that sexual and textual desires may intersect in the re-membering of the nineteenth century. This brings Davies to a central problem in the set-up of a study on freakery, namely the researchers' own investments in such a study and the readers' possible forms of dubious interest in it. Declining to include any visual images of actual persons labelled as 'freaks', she tries to stave off any form of sensationalism or voyeurism and self-consciously reflects on the ethics of her undertaking: "Thinking about fragments of texts as 'dismembered' pieces of bodies – and the image of authors/readers putting them together in various configurations – might be understood as a process of constructing monstrosity" (Davies 2015: 6), which she is clearly intent on avoiding. In her study, Davies considers the cultural and political implications of such constructions, the ethics of representation, the motivations for the production and consumption of freak shows, and the opportunities for agency, resistance and liberation of the subjects themselves.

Taking a transnational and historically wide view of neo-Victorianism,[2] she analyses the Victorian and neo-Victorian representations of the South-African Sarah Baartman (~1789-1815), the American twins Chang and Eng Bunker (1811-1874), the Canadian Anna Swan (1846-1888), the Americans Charles Stratton (1838-1883) and Lavinia Warren (1841-1919) as well as the English Joseph Merrick (1862-90). Despite this national and temporal variation, all performers can be said to be influenced by Victorian Britain in terms of its colonial legacy and, generally, relate to it "as a point of reference, exchange, negation, and contestation" (p. 5). All, in turn, have become important reference points for neo-Victorian appropriations. Thus, Davies's archive includes Suzan-Lori Parks's play *Venus* (1990) and Barbara Chase-Riboud's novel *Hottentot Venus* (2003), which both re-envisage Baartman; Darin Strauss's *Chang and Eng* (2000) and Mark Slouka's *God's Fool* (2002) on the Siamese twins; Susan Swan's *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World* (1983) and Stacy Carlson's *Among the Wonderful* (2011), both biofictionalising Anna Swan; Jane

Sullivan's *Little People* (2011) and Melanie Benjamin's *The Autobiography of Mrs Tom Thumb* (2011), dealing with the lives of Charles Stratton and Lavinia Warren; and the appropriations of Joseph Merrick's life story in Bernard Pomerance's play *The Elephant Man* (1979), David Lynch's 1980 film of the same title and the BBC-series *Ripper Street* (2012-2016). Finally, Davies provides a critical outlook on the literary representation of the showman and freak show manager P.T. Barnum to shed light on the politics of exhibiting 'freaks', and, what is more, to reflect on the politics as well as the cultural 'management' of neo-Victorian desires inherent in consuming the freak show.

One of the strongest and arguably most innovative points of Davies's study is her analysis of the fraught question of 'ownership' of the performers' bodies. The bodies of Baartman, Chang and Eng Bunker and Merrick "remained the property of medical museums" (p. 17), and hence could not, for a very long time, be reclaimed and properly mourned by their families, friends, or communities. This raises a number of ethical issues, such as the question of privacy and control over the performers' bodies (in life and after), common decency towards the dead, and the commodification and ownership of 'freaks' supposedly in the name of science. That bodies were indeed subject to a discourse of ownership degraded the performers to objects of medical interest and of continued voyeuristic exploitation. Their deaths brought this to the fore even more painfully than their lives.

Chapter 1 is devoted to Sarah Baartman, "a Khoikhoi woman from South Africa who was born in the late eighteenth century" and "exhibited in Europe during the early nineteenth century" as 'the Hottentot Venus' (p. 4) prior to Queen Victoria's reign. Her body became the 'property' of George Cuvier after her death, who was interested in the 'Hottentot' woman in order to be able to 'document' a line of human inheritance that cannot be understood in any but ultra-racist terms. He "made a full cast of her body and dissected and preserved her brain, genitalia, and skeleton" (p. 23), Davies notes, with his choices clearly demonstrating which body parts were deemed most suitable for a representation of human evolution so as to help uphold the ideology of white supremacism. Only in the political climate of the 1970s was there sufficient ideological backup for a counter-movement that first achieved the "removal into private storage" of Baartman's body, and eventually, following "South Africa's political reforms towards greater equality in the 1990s" (p. 23), the remains' repatriation in 2002 (though

only after a legislative act by the French Parliament). The remainder of the first chapter is devoted to a critical analysis of Baartman's literary representation in Victorian and neo-Victorian texts with particular emphasis on the question of her agency and consequently the symbolic violence that continues to be exerted in the field of culture.

An interesting twist in the analysis is Davies's employment of Toni Morrison's concept of "re-memory" (p. 26), which Morrison articulated through the character of Sethe in the novel *Beloved* (1987); Davies links re-memory with neo-Victorianism's focus on spectrality and haunting as a combined means of conceptualising our relationship to the nineteenth century, aligned with Mitchell's literal reading of re-membering. Similar to Nicolas Abraham's notion of the phantom, a re-memory is a more or less material manifestation of memory that has the power to haunt or impact later generations. The traumatic past remains inscribed as a heterotopia in the places where it occurred, possessing the implicit power to rematerialise and thus to be re-membered by those who come after. Davies questions how neo-Victorian cultural products focused on Baartman "re-member (make flesh) her 'ghost'" (p. 41) and concludes that her objectification largely continues into neo-Victorianism, even if played out in different, apparently more sympathetic forms. In a very perceptive reading of Diana Ferrus's poem "I've Come to Take You Home" (1998), for example, Davies lays bare the complex ethics of trying to speak for others. She shows how Sarah Baartman becomes once more the object of another's discourse. As the poems speaker tries to set colonial injustices right, Baartman continues to be the person "who is having something done to her; she is never the active agent, but always the passive bearer of someone else's volition" (p. 25). What becomes apparent here is the ethical complexity of central neo-Victorian objectives, namely the "self-conscious rewriting of historical narratives to highlight the suppressed histories of gender and sexuality, race and empire, as well as challenges to the conventional understandings of the historical itself" (Kaplan 2007: 3). If contemporary voices try to say what the subaltern could not, they continue to be caught up in forms of epistemic violence. Davies draws our attention to the tenacity of epistemic violence in the field of cultural representations of freaks and the continuing necessity of critical (and possibly deconstructionist) reading practices.

The second chapter entitled 'Separation Anxieties' is devoted to Chang and Eng Bunker, "xiphopagus conjoined twins" (p. 61), and opens

with a critical reading of Mark Twain's article "Personal Habits of the Siamese Twins" (1869), in which the writer is situated as a surgeon separating the twins to 'normalise' them (see p. 68). Davies throws into relief an obsessive interest in the twins' sexuality that characterises both Victorian and neo-Victorian representations and that is aptly described, to use Robert Bogdan's term, as a "pornography of disability" (qtd. p. 74). Davies argues that "[w]hilst *Chang and Eng* turns the bedrooms of conjoined twins into freak shows, Slouka's *God's Fool* compels the reader to interrogate their own role as a spectator to conjoined sexuality" (p. 91). However, the audience may also feel caught up in such exploitative regimes of vision against their will. I would have welcomed more critical vantage points from which to contextualise such cultural obsessions with sexuality, especially 'othered' sexuality, and demonstrations of neo-Victorianism's possible complicity rather than treating it as a given. Which cultural desires exactly facilitate such representations, and which cultural symptoms are negotiated by neo-Victorian sex scenes and tropes? Where are we allowed to look and which vistas remain foreclosed or forbidden? What can we garner from such a neo-Victorian attention-management? Davies's study might have acquired an even stronger cultural-political impact had it offered more meta-reflections on the competing kinds of representations encountered in the (neo-)Victorian discourse on freakery.

Gender provides the central focus for Chapter 3 on the 'giantess' Anna Swan, as female 'grandeur' is frequently represented in terms of the grotesque, an aesthetic choice that also impacts on the cultural negotiation of the protagonist's options of agency. Again many neo-Victorian texts, including Susan Swan's novel, tend to reiterate Victorian discourses on freakery and to reproduce a voyeuristic complicity, in Anna Swan's case in a "medically-sanctioned rape", but at least not without making the readership "aware of the ethical quandaries of such participation" (p. 112). Davies argues that the novel taps into "the trope of 'medical sensationalism'" (p. 111), but insinuates rather than explains how exactly the novel draws attention to the problematic ethics of Anna Swan's medical examination/rape for the reader. In the novel, the examination is described in a text within a text, "an extract from a tract concerning 'Anatomical Wonders'" (p. 111) authored by the giantess's husband, who describes how he was allowed to clandestinely witness his wife's vaginal examination. Hence, the intradiegetic level the story occupies in the novel invites some

reflective reading. Besides, it is the voyeurism showcased in the scene that puts the readers in the same place as Anna Swan's husband and thus invites an ethical consideration of the reading position. With regard to Anna Swan's depiction, Davies's study once more reveals the tenacity of cultural stereotypes, underlining how hard they are to shake in neo-Victorian adaptations and appropriations. The historical subject's 'bigness' keeps being associated with (implicitly excessive) sexuality; hence, a machinery of discourses regarding both her 'feminine propriety' and her possible attractiveness sets in motion to 'define' and regulate her body within accepted and acceptable boundaries. 'Bigness' challenges the category of 'woman' within a binary heteronormative matrix, and *Neo-Victorian Freakery* reveals how strongly this matrix remains in place to this day.

Playing at the well-known Blakean dichotomy, Chapter 4 is entitled 'Innocence, Experience, and Childhood Dramas: Charles Stratton and Lavinia Warren' (p. 121). This chapter deals with representations of Charles Stratton and Lavinia Warren, "people of short stature" (p. 122), who were exhibited as a couple in a miniature lifestyle and sexualised at a very young age. Davies traces the cultural constructions of childhood and the dubious tendency to blend childhood innocence and adult experience in 'little people' in both Victorian and neo-Victorian representations. She concludes that, sadly, neo-Victorian reiterations of the Strattons' story "struggle to think beyond nineteenth-century discourses of dwarfism in their attempts to render the Strattons as adult agents" (p. 158), including as agents of desire. This sheds further light on the problematic adaptational relationship between nineteenth-century and current discourses: adaptations cannot but repeat Victorian texts with a difference and, thus, almost inevitably, they also remediate and reiterate Victorian value systems. Victorian stereotypes still shape our present outlook, and they seem to retain sufficient cultural power to calibrate our perception of what we consider as 'other'. Our voyeurism is implicated in inherited Victorian visual regimes.

Davies's final case study is devoted to the 'Elephant Man' Joseph Merrick, whose deformity, she contends, is aligned with the cultural construction of sex workers as disfigured and connected to the myths about Jack the Ripper. Moreover, Davies shows how this latter association also connects Merrick to a sensationalised medical discourse in the vein of the Ripper-as-doctor narratives. The chapter reveals the complex enmeshments of different discourses – on medicine, gender and sexuality as well as

disability and deformity – and discusses the interplay between options of agency and voyeuristic desires on the side of consumers and readers. While Davies grants *Ripper Street* (Series 2, Episodes 1-2, 28 October to 04 November 2013) to be "the most complex and thought-provoking re-membering of Merrick" (p. 196), readers are continually reminded of their complicity with strategies of othering. It seems that, generally, strategies of othering are merely being shifted rather than abolished in neo-Victorian re-imaginations of the freak-show. In *Ripper Street*, as Davies argues, Joseph Merrick serves, among other things, to affirm heteronormative structures of desire in which he is allocated a marginalised position because, as the series suggests, he cannot be desired; instead, he has to be "grateful for his own relative aesthetic qualities" (p. 193). It would have been interesting to consider the consequences of the opposite of exclusion: In what way would social power structures alter if 'freaks' could inhabit viable subject positions? While *Neo-Victorian Freakery* is strong in revealing the visual regimes in place to construct self and other, 'norm' and 'freak', it leaves the question of what is at stake in such mechanisms of exclusion largely unanswered.

The Afterword is devoted to the enfreakment of the freak-show manager Phineas Taylor Barnum, who "promoted the Bunker twins, Stratton and Warren, and Anna Swan" (p. 197). As the presumably moral freak who exhibited and possibly exploited 'freaks' for his own financial success, he is fictionalised in Stacy Carlson's *Among the Wonderful* (2011), Melanie Benjamin's *The Autobiography of Mrs Tom Thumb* (2011), and Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* (1984) (see 198). Problematically, however, these fictionalisations employ very similar strategies as Barnum himself, so that these re-memberings also re-trace what we would today consider the ethical shortcomings of Victorian freak shows. This final meta-reflection on neo-Victorian representations hence illustrates once more our continued complicity with Victorian strategies of othering. Davies concludes that "[a] consistent theme in both nineteenth-century and neo-Victorian constructions of freakery is the sexual prurience attached to the exhibition of unusual bodies" and that "the genitals of freak show performers (the 'members' which are reimagined) are a uniting theme across the chapters" (pp. 204-205). She suggests that current readers should "be prepared to reflect on their own desires for sexual remembering of the freak show" (p. 205) and that the neo-Victorian freak show reveals its self-reflexive potential by

returning "an interrogative stare upon the audiences of the genre more broadly" (p. 206).

This conclusion makes a case for the self-reflexive culture of neo-Victorianism, but it also made me wonder whether we are suspended in a circle of reflections or a maze of mirrors that cannot but reflect what is already there, albeit from new angles. In *Neo-Victorian Freakery*, a cigar is never just a cigar. On the other hand, a reflection on scopophilia still entails scopophilia, and, as a reader, one cannot escape the depicted members in the process of re-membering. Hence one may well ask whether the freak show is indeed the right place to look for a new way out of the quandary of voyeurism and liberation or whether we merely replicate a voyeuristic stare that focuses only on a part of the whole, thus reproducing the logic of the fetish. While I find the trope of re-membering very convincing, the concomitant questions concerning the possible ethical construction of monstrosity intriguing, and Davies's readings always meticulous, I sometimes felt suspended in a tug-of-war between voyeurism and agency, objectification and subjectivity. I heartily agree with the requirement of a more critical take on neo-Victorian forms of consumption and of an analysis of the current desires addressed by neo-Victorian products, but I would have welcomed a larger framework within which to read these desires. Is it, for instance, also our on-going implication in Victorian economic structures that perpetuates the pleasure in othering and the cultural consumption of correspondingly 'othered' products? Why are we still reiterating Victorian stereotyping? What is at stake in reiterating such stereotypes in our current societies? Is the focus on sexuality an easily found common denominator between the two eras and possibly a distraction from larger contexts than identity politics? And finally, which new or different meanings, if any, are we determined to glean from these members? A more contextualised orientation might have helped to begin to address some of these questions.

Nonetheless, *Neo-Victorian Freakery* provides an innovative combination of disability studies and poststructuralist approaches such as psychosemiotics and performativity with neo-Victorian concepts of memory. Disability studies is already a well-established approach in Victorian Studies and will certainly also benefit neo-Victorian Studies. In an ethically alert and circumspect way, Davies demonstrates that a lot of cultural energy is required to keep the 'freak' at the margins, while the subject of the discourse on freakery signifies crucially as – and clings

tenaciously to – the normative centre of society. Furthermore, it reflects the complicity of today's audiences in neo-Victorian spectacles, which almost by way of poetic justice may enfreak them in turn.

Notes

1. In terms of theory, Davies also employs Judith Butler's notion of performativity – as she did in her study *Gender and Ventriloquism* (2013) – to reveal in what ways the repeated performance of freaks allows for forms of resistance through repeating such scripts differently and thus challenging the binary 'norm'/'freak' that is established through the difference. While Davies is generally very suave, adroit and concise about theory, her usage of Butler's theory tends to play down the distinction between performance and performativity, which is crucial, however, for the ethical question of agency that may be much more limited than the notion of performance allows (see, e.g., p. 13). Another rather annoying theory-related detail is the consistent misspelling of Leslie Fiedler's name as 'Fielder'. There are other instances of simple misspelling where one would have wished for a more thorough editing process: the misspelling of Lars Eckstein's name as 'Eckhart' (p. 34); mistakes in foreign-language terms, such as the singular-plural-mix-up of 'lacunae' and 'lacuna' (p. 33); and the wrong insertion of 'de' as in "cause de célèbre" (p. 159). These may be minor quibbles, but they can impact on a reader's trust in the accuracy of the information presented.
2. While I very much welcome the transnational openness of Davies's take on neo-Victorianism, I find her definition of it as a genre (see, e.g., pp. 4, 15) rather delimiting, because neo-Victorianism itself comprises multiple genres – for instance the larger genres of prose, poetry and drama, as well as film, graphic novels, etc. – and hence cannot be reduced to one itself. Here, the usage of 'project' to genre would have been preferable.

Bibliography

Kaplan, Cora. 2007. *Victoriana: Histories, Fictions, Criticism*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.