CRITICAL DISABILITY DISCOURSES/
DISCOURS CRITIQUES DANS LE CHAMP DU HANDICAP 10(1)

COMPARATIVE BOOK REVIEW

Mapping Out the Monstrosity of Disabled Bodies

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This comparative book review explores the concept of monstrosity in Hunt-Kennedy's *Between Fitness and Death* (2020) and Nicholas' *Canadian Carnival Freaks and the Extraordinary Body* (2018). This analysis contrasts how Black bodies, seen as congenitally disabled and 'enfreaked' bodies exhibited in sideshows, are discursively framed in monstrous terms. This conception began at birth, continuing to their eventual staging and display upon auction blocks (the enslaved) or sideshow stages (the enfreaked). This review is organized as follows: a brief and general summation of both texts, a discussion of the thematic similarities between them, and a summary of what each text brings to our understanding of disability.

Between Fitness and Death historicizes the disability construct within the context of the sixteenth-to-eighteenth-century transatlantic enterprise of trafficking African slaves. The book touches on representations of disability difference, monstrosity, and race that connect to enslavement in the British Caribbean. In this era, slaves were mined from inland Africa and trudged through the 'Middle Passage' to coastal ports where their sale into captivity started. Hunt-Kennedy (2020) deconstructs the historical record left behind by slaveowners and lawmakers that speciously conflates monstrosity with Black skin and relegates Africans below the threshold of human beings. The author maintains that slave laws disabled able Black bodies both discursively and materially, which induced enduring impairments, creating a subdued labor force.

Canadian Carnival Freaks and the Extraordinary Body examines the freak show (synonymously referred to as a sideshow) as part of the Canadian Exhibitionary Complex. Disability is rooted in the history of freak shows and is imbricated with other striations of marginality, such as race, gender, and class (Nicholas, 2018). Sideshows were comprised of performers who broke from the typical mould of 'healthy' looking society and found refuge behind the canvas curtains or in dirt pits of sideshows, where revellers had to pay for the privilege to gaze at them. This rendered the enfreaked as spectacles for visual consumption, which is reflective of how social and cultural ideas of bodily-presented difference and normalcy determined individual value.

Deformity was characterized by outward abnormalities grafted onto its bearer's body that were deemed unnatural, ranging from ugliness to functional impairments, such as palsied limbs or clubfoot (Hunt-Kennedy, 2020). Nicholas maintains that monstrosity is a term used to categorize those with congenital deformations, and not those whose impairments are acquired by chance or happenstance. Blackness was viewed as a form of impure aberration that had strayed genetically from the phenotypical White norm, counterposed to whiteness, which was cast as pure, eye-pleasing, and beautiful. Amid the centuries of Caribbean slavery, popular English thought "viewed the heritability of blackness as a permanent defect" (Hunt-Kennedy, 2020, p. 35). Likewise, carnival sideshows frame the normal body as White, positioning racialized performers as defective, primitive, animalistic, and incurable.

Themes

Carnival owners conferred greater status upon freaks, whose source of monstrosity originated in a congenital condition. The rarer the anomaly was, the greater the revenues.

Contrarily, enchained Black bodies, born with impairments, fetched lower prices in the slave ports of coastal Western Africa. Black bodies, which had acquired impairment as a result of toiling on the plantation, were not reduced to near-total valuelessness; their impaired bodies were 'repurposed' to satisfy other production targets. Enslaved disabled bodies were still seen as able enough to work.

Etiologies of Monstrous Difference

Maternal blame was common to both Hunt-Kennedy and Nicholas' histories of disability. Hunt-Kennedy discusses the legal notion of maternal inheritance that posits that the monstrous child inherited the phenotypes of Blackness from the mother, not the father. *Carnival Freaks* does not discuss maternal inheritance. Both works do, however, explore the pre-natal superstitious belief that the machinations of the mother's perceived thoughts impress a monstrous disposition upon the fetus. This disposition damns the genetics of the infant. While Hunt-Kennedy frames this phenomenon as 'maternal imagination,' Nicholas refers to it as 'maternal impression.' Consciously or not, Hunt-Kennedy portrays maternal imagination as a purely African phenomena affecting birthing Black women. Nicholas does not discriminate between maternal impressions born from Black mothers and those from White ones. Hunt-Kennedy maintains that maternal imagination supposes an "intergenerational link between monstrosity and enslaveability" (p. 15). Maternal impressions stigmatize both Black bodies and those subjected to the carnivalesque gaze, which sideshow promotions tap into to sell sideshow freaks and their stage acts. Here, quite literally, stigma sells. Nicholas speaks of Lionel the Lion, born with hypertrichosis to a mother who witnessed a lion maul her husband to death at the time she was pregnant.

The traumatic memory caused Lionel to be born in the image of a lion. Blaming the bad biology of children on mothers was a way to make sense of monstrous births.

The Exegesis of Black Flesh

Both authors engage with textual sources that maintain that the monstrous interiors of the enslaved and enfreaked can be glimpsed by reading their scarred or disfigured exteriors. For instance, the lines of scars from former lacerations were read like a sentence scripting the narrative of the wearer and their survival stories of enduring decades of hurt. Alternatively, enslaved people with crooked legs, whose knees jutted inward towards one another, were read as being evil-mannered and signifying an innate deficiency (Hunt-Kennedy, 2020). The punishments doled out to runaway slaves when they were recaptured resulted in further maiming and scarring, which lengthened the surficial script that narrated their bodies. In the slavery piece, Black bodies were surveilled via visible blemishes or abraded flesh. Runaway slave advertisements offered descriptive accounts of these wounds to make incorrigible runaways easier to identify. In one instance described by Nicholas, Barnum Bailey's first so-called freak exhibition in 1835 featured the autopsy of 161-year-old Joice Heth—a Black woman, slave, and former nurse to President George Washington. Barnum let passels of paying punters into the exhibition to witness her being literally torn open closely. Heth's deceased body was repurposed to appeal to White spectators, whose eyes raked her face and torn body.

Social Cures, Relief, and Protection

In both histories, the subjugated were sold the idea that relief and protection could be secured through slavery for the Blacks and through sideshows for the enfreaked. The carnival monoculture prided itself on being a haven for wayward freaks (Nicholas, 2018).

Slaves were sold the excuse that their enslavement was for their own protection against "evil disposed people" (Hunt-Kennedy, 2020, p. 39) and from themselves: i.e., "to the extent that blackness was perceived as a deformity, slavery became understood as its 'cure'" (Hunt-Kennedy, 2020, p. 37). Likewise, Nicholas describes parents sending their 'mutant offspring' to work in the freak shows, believing they were shielding them from a society that would shun them. To some parents, the freak show was the penultimate dumping ground for their deformed progeny to find meaningful work. In both histories, plantation slavery and the freak show were deemed worthy social cures (or sites) by affording them work in the same way as consummately White and able-bodied labourers.

Commodification of the Monster's Labour and Abilities

Hunt-Kennedy explored how disabled labouring Black bodies were commoditized. The most agile and youthful slaves, deemed ideally suited for plantation production, fetched a heftier price on the open market. Enslavers sought out bodies that evidenced markers of improved health, signifying that the enslaved were resistant to, for instance, smallpox, by espying pockmarked skin. Comparatively, the most deformed, hideous, and disfigured who engaged in performative labour yielded sideshows their greatest revenues. In both histories, the enfreaked and enslaved were contrasted against the ideal normal body—the White and male body. While performative labourers in freak shows earned a wage, the enslaved labourers' worth as humans was inseparably tied to their output or conditioned based on their resale value. Sideshow performers, who achieved success on one circuit, could negotiate contracts with other outfits to realize a higher wage. Some adolescent freaks were estranged from their wages when their pay was forwarded to their families. Whether these sent-off wages ultimately returned to the performers is uncertain.

While freaks as a group were freer, labouring under slavish conditions and "defined by their hard work" (Nicholas, 2018, p. 80), Blacks were defined by their ability for hard work (Hunt-Kennedy, 2020). Both texts talk of the hardships that monstrous bodies endured during monotonous work routines, leaving little time for rest and hygiene maintenance.

Destined to Labour

In both texts, the enslaved and enfreaked were considered predisposed to labour in their respective 'fields'. English enslavers claimed that the monstrosity of Africans "made them better suited than other humans to enslavement and hard labor" (Hunt-Kennedy, 2020, p. 25). Sideshow showmen sold their freaks the notion that being staged and displayed in the exhibitionary complex for a wage was the more humane alternative to state dependency, or worse, ending up confined in an idiot or mental asylum. To the extent that their freakish bodies provoked disgust and awe, so-called freaks "were destined to labour in carnivals because that was the only work they could accept in a society intolerant toward the bodily other" (Nicholas, 2018, p. 103). Parents, either too embarrassed or ashamed to care for them, were aware of the limited chances their children would have at achieving some semblance of normalcy, and "saw the sideshow as a legitimate, if not preferable, choice for their children" (Nicholas, 2018, p. 139). Children had no choice in the matter or were too young to consent; their futures were decided for them.

Caged, Staged, and Displayed

Re-apprehended enslaved people in Barbados were caged in the center of towns until their owners reclaimed them (Hunt-Kennedy, 2020). Those who escaped reapprehension were featured in fugitive notices. Exhibiting images of the wounded in such notices was another way that the race and disabilities of fugitive slaves were staged for "visual

consumption" (p. 124). These advertisements can be distinguished from freak shows by the "terror they engendered" (p. 124). Nicholas describes how some carnivals ran ethnographical shows, where race and disability were staged to reaffirm the supremacy of whiteness. In either history, the disabled body was prodded by a disgusted (or enthralled) public: the slave was spat upon and cursed at, the enfreaked probed with insensitive questions, where their body and mind were lashed with tongues rather than horse whips.

Gaps in the Literature

Fitness and Death focuses mainly on corporeality. Hunt-Kennedy offers scattered and incomplete discussions on the psychological trauma enforced upon enchained Africans seized from their natal homes by captors who looked like them and marched them through the Middle Passage to coastal ports. This is especially concerning, since she discusses the Middle Passage as one of three sites of slavery-induced disability. The disabling effects of Black-on-Black sales are not mentioned, therefore betraying their experience, and the less-than-politically-correct truth that Black African traders sold Africans to White European buyers. Did this make slavery more tolerable among Whites in the British Caribbean, perhaps lessening concern among enslavers about humanity if people who looked like them sold them? There is no mention of the possible psychic harm endured by those who engaged in performative labour in freak shows, or how said harm manifested. Did they make an unsightly spectacle when their trauma-addled interiors matched their disfigured exteriors? If disability is cultural, as Nicholas maintains, madness has since overtaken physical impairments in cultural depictions of freaks as sites of terror. This shift from horrible bodies to horrifying minds is not mentioned in either book.

Did freaks take part in the storying of their origins' stories, or the crafting of the sales spiel? Or was the ballyhoo solely a creation of showmen's creativity? To what effect did scripting their own story aid or market the freaks' onstage (or pitted) performance? While Hunt-Kennedy cannot be faulted for her lack of engagement with the first-person perspectives of the enslaved, given the limitations of the source material, would expanding her analysis to include the French Empire that was also active in plantation slavery in the Caribbean at that time have been useful?

There are dozens of White freaks who are assigned animal monikers in Nicholas' work. However, there is no discussion of how animality and Whiteness intersected, specifically the questioning of how bestial labels affixed to White bodies may have caused White freaks to turn the critical (possibly racist) gaze inward.

Nicholas concedes that there is a dearth of oral accounts, and therefore photographs comprise the "most complete documentation" of side show performers. Both works survey images, one photographic, the other cartoon sketches, for markers of difference and exploitation (p. 20). A multi-methodological approach, including their descriptive historiographical approach, may have been useful. For instance, Gleeson's (2011) polytextual thematic analysis, which involves the analysis of images, could have aided Hunt-Kennedy's analysis of hundreds of slave advertisements, as well as the abundance of pictorial evidence of freak show exhibits available to Nicholas. It is hard to find a clear methodology in Nicholas's work, apart from the endeavors at chronology. Hunt-Kennedy's work takes the reader on a recursive journey between centuries. It can be argued that neither work was initially written with a disability studies audience in mind. Hunt-Kennedy's work focuses more on excavating the history of slavery. As for Nicholas,

the reader may be left with the impression that disability was inserted as an afterthought to reach a wider audience, perhaps on the suggestion of the book's editor. This is made all the starker by their lack of engagement with disability scholars to make sense of their findings.

Summary

Hunt-Kennedy's work challenges disability studies researchers to reflect upon the colonial histories of disability as they intersect with race and labor. Her work explores the effects of slavery-induced disability and how it shapes "the embodied reality of enslavement in the British Caribbean" (Hunt-Kennedy, 2020, p. 3). Nicholas examines the literature on freak shows and identifies the synergistic relationship between medicine and the marketing of enfreaked performers, as well as how the latter adopted the discourse of physicians to frame their onstage acts. What ended each exploitative practice was the progressive intentions of spectators, e.g., abolitionists, who were set on expiating their sin of being complicit observers and by evoking the image of bruised and battered bondspersons' bodies to legislate against slavery in the Anglo-Caribbean. Likewise, the carnivals' detractors pitied the performers and urged municipal governments to cancel the culture of freak shows.

References

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