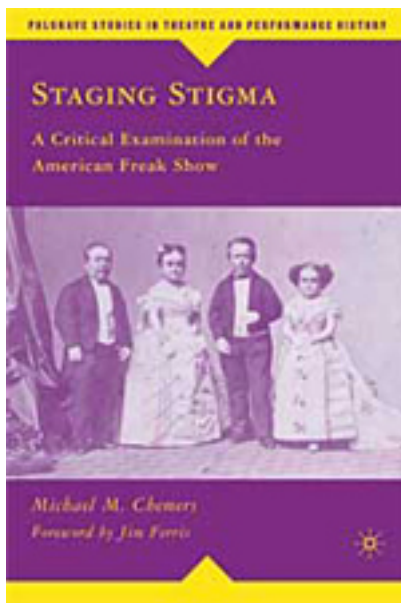


## Michael M. Chemers' *Staging Stigma: A Critical Examination of the American Freak Show*

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Chemers, Michael M. *Staging Stigma: A Critical Examination of the American Freak Show*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. 192 pages. \$74.95 hardcover.



"Ladies and Gentlemen! Step inside! Don't be shy! For you will not believe your eyes!" The carnival talker's enthusiastic voice calls out to the passing crowd and we feel the draw of illicit desire to walk inside the tent and view the staging of the bizarre, the "freakish" humans rendered abnormal in order to alleviate our anxieties about our own precarious position in relation to our bodies. Michael M. Chemers argues that in capitalizing on such desire, the freak show in the United States and beyond has historically created both oppression of and opportunity for its performers. Previous work on this subject has tended toward either a "knee-jerk condemnation" of the freak show's long history of exploitation or, alternatively, a "misguided sentimentality" that often reproduces its voyeuristic dynamic (3). *Staging Stigma* instead strives for a critical analysis of "freakery" and the forces that shape and record its history.

Drawing on Erving Goffman's work on stigma management, Chemers argues that throughout modern history freak shows have been contested sites that shape, and are shaped by, changing notions of disability and other forms of stigma. Following work by Robert Bogdan (1988) and Rosemarie Garland-Thompson (1997, 1996), he employs disability theory as a means for conceptualizing "the freak." Next he recognizes performance as tool both political and aesthetic for disabled people to manage their stigma. By tracing four key moments in the history of freak shows *Staging Stigma* considers

how disability is not a fixed identity but a performance that is both formed through and continually negotiating other social narratives.

Chemers argues that technological innovations, scientific ideas, cultural values, systems of social control, and aesthetics all factor into how disability is socially conceived. Through the staging of stigma, freak shows render visible that which is often tacit and invisible, therefore imbued with critical power to examine stigma. While other performances of disability often attempt to alleviate anxiety through the normalization of difference, the freak show refuses to soothe the tension that disability creates in the non-disabled. Instead, it nurtures and exploits this tension for profit, making transgressive statements about difference. Through such critical exposition, freak shows might offer the possibility for a “progressive vision of the future” where disability is no longer stigmatized but celebrated as an intrinsic part of the human condition (5).

Chemers explores four historical moments of the freak show: 1) mid-19th century performances of the celebrated actor, Charles Stratton (a person of short stature), and his performative work against notions of indecency, 2) the later emergence of Darwinism in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the dime museum began to capitalize upon narratives of edification, scientific exploration, and progress, allowing freakery to achieve new levels of social acceptance, 3) the turn of the 20th century’s “Revolt of the Freaks,” where sideshow performers resisted the emergent eugenics movement, embracing an “uncanny synthesis” of Darwinism, liberal humanism, labor solidarity, and religion, and 4) the contemporary freak show that constructs a narrative of “peculiarity as eminence,” one that employs a postmodern aesthetic and critical position. Of these four historical moments, Chemers devotes closest attention to Stratton’s work, drawing from ample primary sources in order to glean how stigma and identity was performed and received by the public in a manner much different than today. On the other hand, his treatment of freakery as a political postmodern performative might benefit from a closer reading of both the performances themselves and their audience reception, particularly Coney Island’s *Sideshow by the Seashore* where he personally attended performances and had access to both the artists and audiences.

Employing the “social model” of disability, which arose out of the climate of disability activism in the 1980s, critics have argued that freak shows inevitably exploit those with disabilities (even voluntary participants) by reducing them to medical aberrations. On the other hand, proponents counter that the freak show can be a self-reflexive political performance that utilizes problematic constructs of disability and difference in order to address and critique stigma that otherwise go unchallenged. One such cited performance is by Jennifer Miller, a circus and sideshow artist with facial hair who theatrically marks her corporeal difference in order to confront audience notions of gender identity. Marketing herself as “A Lady With a Beard,” Miller concedes that she employs a disturbing narrative of difference where a woman with facial hair is considered anomalous despite the reality that millions of women are capable of growing beards but are conversely disciplined through ideologies of gender. By subsequently challenging this fiction,

she is able to marshal her stigmatization and turn it back upon her audience. By means of performance “freaks” are thus able to draw out the “disabling gaze,” expose it, and critique it.

David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder (2005) argue that any scholastic engagement with the freak show remains essentially tied to the exploitation of embodiment. Chemers responds to this criticism by reframing these performances of stigma in a way that offers disability a sense of wonder within difference, thus replacing the essentially deficit-based social model, which even in its resistance is based upon tropes of disgust and deviance. As the field of disability studies continues to search for theoretical alternatives, “freaktopia” (Rosemarie Garland-Thompson’s term for this appreciation of the proliferation of human differences; Thompson 1996, 1997) challenges us to celebrate the unusual as natural and positive. In such a spirit, *Staging Stigma* offers the freak show as a means for both disability studies and theater history “to reclaim a lost past and map an uncertain future” (134).

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