

Freaks and Bodily Difference: Using Disability History as a Lens

March 4-8, 2009

Eli Clare, Eli.Clare@oberlin.edu

Description:

Using the history of the freak show, this mini-course will explore ways in which bodily difference has been named freakish over time and how people who have been named freaks --- disabled people, people of color, fat people, bearded women, LGBT people, and others --- have both benefited from and been exploited by that naming. Through reading, film, discussion, and small group work, we'll explore the freak show in the U.S. through the lens of race, colonialism, and disability. We will focus particularly on three questions:

- Who were the people who worked as freaks in the freak show, and how did they become freaks?
- What can we learn about bodily difference, exploitation, and resistance by studying the freak show?
- How does the freak show of the 1840s to 1940s manifest today?

Readings:

You can find all the readings plus additional resources on-line at the Oberlin Blackboard site.

Assignments:

You will be responsible for the following. See below for descriptions.

- all the readings
- class participation and attendance
- a small group presentation
- a 5 page paper

Grading:

Everyone will receive a pass/no pass grade for the class. Your assignments will be weighted as follows:

- readings—25%
- participation and attendance—25%
- presentation—25%
- paper—25%

Wednesday, March 4, 7:00 – 8:30 PM, Hallock Auditorium

Public Lecture:

- “Listening to the Freaks: A History of Circus Tents, Dime Museums, and Everyday Gawking”

Thursday, March 5, 7:00 – 9:00 PM

Reading:

- Eli Clare, from “Freaks and Queers,” p. 71-84
- Robert Bogdan, “The Social Construction of Freaks,” p. 23-37

Friday, March 6, 5:00 – 6:30 PM, King 123

Reading:

- Rachel Adams, "Freaks of Culture: Institutions, Publics, and the Subjects of Ethnographic Knowledge," p. 25-59

Assignment:

- Start small group project in class

Saturday, March 7, 1:00 – 3:00 PM, King 123

Reading:

- "P.H.*reaks: The Hidden History of People with Disabilities," p. 63-109

Assignment:

- Small group presentations in class

Sunday, March 8, 1:00 – 3:30 PM, King 123

Assignment:

- Pick and research a present-day manifestation of the freak show that interests you. This is the first step of your paper.

In-Class Film:

- "The Couple in the Cage"

Sunday, March 15

Assignment:

- Paper due via e-mail

Assignments:

Small Group Project

Description: In groups of four, pick one of the people from the list below. They are all people who worked the freak show in one way or another. We've read about most of them in class. You can find more resources about each of them on the Oberlin Blackboard site. As a group, design a 10 minute presentation that addresses at least one of the following questions:

- What are the forces, factors, and cultural beliefs that turned this person into a freak?
- What role did disability and ableism, race and racism, and/or colonialism play in this process
- How did the issues of exploitation, self-chosen performance, and resistance play out in her/his work and/or life as a freak?

Think about the questions from at least two of these perspectives: 1) your own, 2) the person you've chosen, 3) her/his boss or the showman who ran the show, and 4) the rubes (the people who paid to see exhibits at the freak show)..

Use your creativity when putting the presentation together. You could write a letter to the showman, have the person you've chosen write a letter to you, stage

a debate about exploitation and self-chosen performance, act out a skit. These are just a few ideas. Use your imagination.

List of People

- Ota Benga
- Mercy Lavinia Warren Bump
- Hiram and Barney Davis
- Daisy and Violet Hilton
- Ishi
- William Johnson
- “Maximo” and “Bartola”
- Charles Stratton
- Ann Thompson
- the “Ubangi savages”
- someone else who catches your interest

Paper

Pick a present-day manifestation of the freak show that interests you. You could choose something we’ve read, seen, or talked about in class, or you could choose something else. (See “Present-Day Freak Shows” handout on the Oberlin Blackboard site for some ideas and resources.) Write a 5 page paper exploring the connections and/or disconnects between the freak show of the 1840s to 1940s and your chosen present-day freak show. Include thinking about disability and ableism, race and racism, and colonialism.

I welcome papers in alternative formats—audio, video, creative writing, for instance—as long as they include the critical thinking that the assignment requires. Be in touch with me if you want to complete this assignment in an alternative format.

You’ll be e-mailing your assignments to me a week after I’ve left campus. E-mail them as attached Microsoft Word documents. Let me know if this is a problem for you. They are due on March 15. If you need an extension, e-mail me before the due date. I won’t accept papers after March 16 unless we’ve negotiated an extension.