

**“Amusement for the Philosphic Genius”:
Freaks, Beasts, Gadgets, and the Performance of American Exceptionalism**

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This dissertation investigates the American performance culture that developed outside the playhouse and in the northeastern colonies between the late seventeenth century and the turn of the nineteenth century. These performances often took place in the familiar, communal, and convivial settings of taverns, town halls, pleasure gardens, and local fairs. Displays of wonders — both natural and unnatural — provoked early American audiences to question their own understanding of their place in Anglo-American and circumatlantic society. They challenged spectators to rethink traditional understandings of what was strange and what was recognizable; they offered viewers opportunities to reimagine and expand their connotation of *American*. Through paratheatrical activities, colonists took cognitive possession of the unfamiliar and performed their superiority over it. The displays of human physical anomalies, unfamiliar and nonindigenous animals, and technological apparatuses provided early Americans — sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously — the means to order their existence and the environment that they seized, that they feared, and about which they knew little.

Early generations of Anglo-Americans were hardly destined to undertake our Founding Fathers’ experiment in democracy, but they were still preoccupied with creating a recognizable order, a chain of being — Great or not — within which they could find a certain place for themselves. These attempts ran parallel to innovations in scientific methods and taxonomies that took place during the Long Eighteenth Century, and they often drew from them. As Jan Bondeson has written of the Pig-Faced Lady of London, the court dwarf of Poland, and other

biological anomalies in early modern Europe, “From the seventeenth century onwards, medical science struggled to understand and classify these ‘freaks of nature,’ and to incorporate all kinds of human congenital malformations in a system of teratology.”¹ Carl Linnaeus’s establishment of biological nomenclature in the 1730s exemplified the period’s quest for discovery, classification, and order. It is significant that animal exhibitions, human anomalies, and mechanical ingenuity constituted the first performances in the northeastern colonies as early as the 1680s — those monsters and mechanisms that challenged and thus reified boundaries of normalcy and rationalism. It is just as significant that the young nation’s first major cultural institution was Charles Willson Peale’s museum of natural specimens. This dissertation is concerned with the performances that took place in the intervening century.

In *The Enlightenment in America*, Henry F. May posits that Enlightenment ideals did not flourish in America, at least not as the traditionally understood products of Newton, Locke, Voltaire and company: “most forms of the Enlightenment developed among the middle and upper classes of European cities, spread mainly among similar groups in America, and failed to reach the agrarian majority.”² Paine, Jefferson, and Madison may have been intellectual heirs to the great *philosophes*, but among the vast majority of the colonial population — “the inarticulate”³ in May’s formulation — rationalism retained a more earthly purpose, effecting a quest for identity that preoccupied Americans into the nineteenth century. Into his commonplace book, Dr. Benjamin Rush inserted a broadside advertising the 1796 display at the Black Horse Tavern in Philadelphia of a black man whose “natural colour began to rub off.” In later eras the unnamed man would be diagnosed with the skin condition vitiligo, but the advertisement billed

¹ Jan Bondeson, *Freaks: The Pig-Faced Lady of Manchester Square & Other Medical Marvels* (Gloucestershire: Tempus, 2006), 18–19.

² Henry F. May, *The Enlightenment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), xiii.

³ *Ibid.*

his body as the site of a “fight” between whiteness and blackness, which “opens a wide field of amusement for the philosophic genius.” Anyone, the broadside suggests, can be a such a “genius” by using human anomalies, unusual animals, and the mechanical to claim superiority over a wider world.

Since its original publication in 1983, Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* has provided a framework to many historians of early America as a means to understand the coalescence of the colonies prior to and during the War for Independence. Anderson defines the imagined community as a conjectural, delimited, and autonomous political entity: “It is so sovereign because the concept was born in an age in which Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely-ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm.”⁴ Earlier scholars of early America have been tempted to root American exceptionalism in a teleology that draws a direct line from colonial rebellion to an inevitable republic (and further to manifest destiny). Still, it is possible to permit such colonial “imagination” outside the assumption that the colonies would eventually become the republic. In his penultimate chapter, Anderson considers the museum as part of a “totalizing classificatory grid, which could be applied with endless flexibility to anything under the state’s real or contemplated control: peoples, religions, religions, languages, produces, monuments, and so forth.”⁵ In this dissertation, I replace the *state* in Anderson’s framework with more localized examples of *people*.

In her study of eighteenth-century American pleasure gardens, Naomi Stubbs references Michel Foucault’s connotation of heterotopic communities:⁶

⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Rev. ed. (London; New York: Verso, 1991), 7.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 184.

⁶ Naomi J. Stubbs, *Cultivating National Identity through Performance: American Pleasure Gardens and Entertainment* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 7.

there are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places — places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society — which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted.⁷

I suggest the taverns, gardens, fairs, lecture halls, and homes, wherein unusual persons, animals, and mechanisms were displayed, served a similar function. These “effectively enacted utopias” allowed American colonists to demonstrate their mastery over nature and supposedly inferior peoples.

My dissertation is structured around the categories of performance noted above, one each for the displays on almanac pages and on makeshift stages of human anomalies, unfamiliar animals, and mechanical ingenuity. Themes of racial supremacy, class warfare, and colonial identity resonate within each such category. I wish to participate in CSM’s forum as I continue to conceptualize the framework within which these performances took place. The dilemma I constantly encounter is how to develop the argumentation above and beyond merely collecting specimens for an Old Curiosity Shop-type of historiography. In a passage above from my prospectus, I suggest that Anderson and Foucault may provide organizing frames, but I wish to work up from primary sources rather than down from theory. Potential primary documents include images and narratives in almanacs, such as those of killer werewolves and tribes of giants, and broadsides advertising human displays, such as Rush’s broadside noted above.

⁷ Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” trans. Jay Miskowiec, *Architecture/Mouvement/Continuité* 5 (1984): 47.