

## **Disability, the Sideshow, and Modern Museum Practices**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper addresses questions about disability history, the history of the relationship between museums and people with disabilities, the history of museums and exhibits as collections of curiosities including people with disabilities, and how that past has informed the present. Preserving and distributing knowledge have been the major pillars of museums' work during the modern age. Racial and ethnic inclusiveness were addressed throughout the Civil Rights Movement and the decades that followed, and accommodations have also been made in society for physical disabilities with the Americans with Disabilities Act. Many times the community has excluded disabled people, whether intentionally or not.*

*In addition to evaluating information on how museums and other organizations of the past, the sideshow, and the community in general treated people with disabilities, this paper also presents information about how modern museums react to their learning disabled visitors. The paper presents information about research into possibilities of a model for museums to use to develop specific programming and exhibits for people with cognitive delay and disabilities*

## **Introduction**

The words *museum* and *exhibit* have different meanings and evoke different feelings for every person. Age, race, and other demographics could affect the way that a person views museums, exhibits, and educational programming; furthermore, museums from the distant past would hardly be recognizable to many people today. From the collections by ancient kings and nobles to the early cabinets of natural curiosities of Europe, museums have an extensive history. Additionally, people with disabilities have had a long and storied past, which is often forgotten or excluded from the history that is presented in classrooms, museums, or at historic sites.

## **Dime Museums and the Birth of the Sideshow**

Artist, inventor, and entrepreneur Charles Willson Peale opened the first major “museum” in Philadelphia in 1794. In a broadside distributed to the American Philosophical Society and other prominent social figures of Philadelphia, Peale emphasized that his museum would both collect and exhibit publicly a wide range of artifacts, focusing on natural history and art but including historical items as well. His museum was a for-profit enterprise, but Peale would have liked government support. To keep the doors open, he depended on attractions that ensured repeat customers.<sup>1</sup>

Peale’s museum struggled, and eventually entertainment broker P.T. Barnum bought most of the collection. Barnum’s American Museum, opened in New York City in 1840, advertised itself as a museum, but it was really little more than a “freak show.” Indeed, following the opening of Barnum’s “museum” in 1840, freak shows would remain at their height until 1940. The museum contained many exhibits and gaffes, but it also housed many people who were considered to be rarities worthy of exhibition. These people included: General Tom Thumb, a person with dwarfism; “the Aztec Twins,” albinos; the “What Is It?,” who was also a person with microcephaly; and many other “living curiosities.”<sup>2</sup>

For over 100 years, entrepreneurs organized exhibitions of people with physical, mental, and behavioral disabilities or impairments to amuse the public and generate a profit. Barnum’s “museum” and others like it became a sub-category of museums, known as “dime museums” which advertised exhibitions as educational and scientific activities, but the exhibits were actually a profitable business for those in charge.<sup>3</sup> The dime museum began its rise in American popular culture in the mid-nineteenth century. Dime museums charged a low admission fee for the general population to see “dioramas, panoramas, georamas, cosmoramas, paintings, relics, freaks, stuffed animals, menageries, waxworks, and theatrical

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1 Hugh H. Genoways and Mary Anne Andrei, eds. *Museum Origins: Readings in Early Museum History and Philosophy* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2008), 23.

2 Phineas T. Barnum, *An Illustrated Catalogue And Guide Book To Barnum's American Museum* (New York : Wynkoop, Hallenbeck & Thomas, circa 1860). Microcephaly literally means “small head.”

3 Godkin, 9.

performance.”<sup>4</sup> The museums served as varying educational experiences for Victorian people who wanted to spend their leisure time advancing their lives in some way.<sup>5</sup> Many “freaks” performed at these sites and were exhibited in buildings that were called *museums*. Whether or not these institutions fit the definition of a museum today is not determined here, but the term was irrevocably associated with the weird, strange, and unknown.<sup>6</sup> The museums often housed gaffes or fake objects and people and, as in the case of Barnum’s museum following its downfall, were often transformed into a circus or carnival sideshow exhibits. The people of the time likely did not conflate museums with sideshows; however, the sideshows were generally billed as educational events and opportunities.

In 1865 Barnum’s American Museum was destroyed by fire. A few days later, critic Edwin Lawrence Godkin described and chastised the museum in the pages of *The Nation*: “the worst and most corrupt classes of our people must seek some new place of resort.” He then questioned whether visitors were more upset by the fire that destroyed the museum or the state of the artifacts in the museum when it stood. Godkin asserted that the “insufficiency, disorder, [and] neglected condition” of the museum should have insulted visitors.<sup>7</sup>

The Barnum American Museum fire was reported in the *New York Times*, and the article listed many of the items of interest that had been lost in the fire, though none of the people who were exhibited had been killed.<sup>8</sup> After the fire claimed the museum, an article published in 1865 claimed that Barnum was constructing a new museum to replace the old. The author claimed: “[T]he fact is, that the loss of the museum was a national calamity.”<sup>9</sup> However, the museum yet again burned to the ground in 1868 and was not again rebuilt.<sup>10</sup> Instead, Barnum took his show on the road where it became one of the most famous traveling circuses.

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4 Andrea Stulman Dennett, *Weird and Wonderful: The Dime Museum in America* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 5.

5 Ibid., 7.

6 More information about the rise and impact of Dime Museums and entertainment industry as a whole is available in Dennett’s *Weird and Wonderful: The Dime Museum in America* (New York: New York University Press, 1997); John Kasson, *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978); Hugh H. Genoways, and Mary Anne Andrei, eds. *Museum Origins: Readings in Early Museum History and Philosophy*, (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2008); Charles C. Sellers, *Mr. Peale’s Museum: Charles Wilson Peale and the first popular museum of Natural Science and Art* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1980); Gary Kulik, “Designing the Past: History Museums Exhibitions from Peale to the Present,” in *History Museums in the United States: A Critical Assessment*, eds. Warren Leon and Roy Rosenweig. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 3-37.

7 Edwin L. Godkin, “A Word About Museums,” *The Nation*, (July 27, 1865): 113-114.

8 “DISASTROUS FIRE: Total Destruction of Barnum’s American Museum.” in *New York Times* (1857-1922); Jul 14, 1865; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *The New York Times* (1851-2009).

9 “Barnum’s New Museum Project.: MUSEUM WILL CONTAIN...” in *New York Times* (1857-1922); Jul 18, 1865; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *The New York Times* (1851-2009) pg. 5.

10 “BURNING OF BARNUM’S MUSEUM: LIST OF LOSSES AND INSURANCES” in *New York Times* (1857-1922); Mar 4, 1868; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *The New York Times* (1851-2009) pg. 8.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Barnum and Bailey's "Greatest Show on Earth" boasted "Peerless Prodigies of Physical Phenomena" with both born and created anomalies. In the image are a strong man, a bearded lady, a pin-head, two small men, a dog-faced girl, two unidentified ladies, a man with a parasitic twin, a sword swallower, conjoined twins, and a giant. Organizers named the people who were integral to these attractions curiosities, rarities, oddities, wonders, mistakes, prodigies, special people, and even monsters. They categorized performers into different races and natural mistakes, such as giants, people without arms or legs, the obese, conjoined twins, "wild" men allegedly hailing from foreign and unexplored lands, little people, albinos, and more. Today's freak shows consist mainly of people who are "made freaks" who do dangerous tricks or have rare talents, though there are some instances of "born different" still exhibited today.

From the popular Coney Island amusement area in New York City to traveling circuses and sideshows, exhibits that featured people with physical differences were some of the most prevalent attractions. Dime museums and national exhibitions up to the mid-twentieth century often featured humans who were considered "different" for the public to view. The exhibition of people in these shows was sometimes voluntary and sometimes decided by the guardians of the people considered to be "freaks." The exhibitions of people considered different have been called many things: Raree Shows, Halls of Human Curiosities, Sideshows, Pitshows, Odditoriums, Congress of Oddities, Collections of Human Wonders, Museum of Nature's Mistakes, and Freakshows. One of the first examples of a traveling exhibit of a person appeared in 1738 in a colonial American newspaper; the paper ran an advertisement for an exhibit of a person who "was taken in a wood at Guinea, tis a female about four feet high, in every part like a woman excepting her head which nearly resembles the ape."<sup>11</sup> Throughout the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries, freakshows or sideshows were among the most popular attractions for the middle-class public. The situation of those individuals with disabilities, especially those with cognitive delays, is an important piece of the past that informs present displays and exhibits, museum policies, and popular attitudes.

## **What is a "Freak"?**

To understand the impact that these past exhibitions have on the present, it is important first to understand what a freak show is or was, and what defines a "freak." Robert Bogdan argues in 1988 that freak was a metaphor for separation, marginality, and an aspect of the dark side of human experience. He goes on to assert that "freak" is a frame of mind for the person called a freak, a set of practices that person employs and a way of thinking about and presenting people. To be a freak is to enact a tradition of stylized presentation.<sup>12</sup> *Sideshow U.S.A.* by Rachel Adams defines "freakishness" as "a historically variable quality, derived less from particular physical attributes than the spectacle of the extraordinary body swathed in

11 Robert Bogden. *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 25.

12 Ibid., 3.

theatrical props.”<sup>13</sup> Rather than a medical or standardized term, Adams argues that “freak” serves as a classification for those who performed or displayed themselves for the public. Adams also claims that those who are called freaks “announce themselves as the antithesis of normality” by participating in exhibitions.<sup>14</sup> Rosemarie Garland-Thomson is a disability historian who analyzes disability and the freak show; she claims instead of self-naming that the road to “enfreakment” comes from the “normal” people with more power who need to validate their own regularity by calling attention to differences in others. Garland-Thomas argues that “freaks are above all products of perception: they are the consequences of a comparative relationship in which those who control the social discourse and the means of representation recruit the seeming truth of the body to claim the center for themselves and banish others to the margins.”<sup>15</sup> Humans have created the aspects of freakishness as a cultural construct, and the attributes of “freakishness” are not intrinsic to a person with any certain disability or ability. By creating this separate cultural category, society takes away the humanity of the people who are considered to be freaks. Bogdan warns viewers not to conflate the performance with the person behind his or her role in the sideshow.<sup>16</sup> Building upon Bogdan’s assertion, Garland-Thomson again argues that:

[T]he body envelops and obliterates the freak’s potential humanity. When the body becomes pure text, a freak has been produced from a physically disabled human being. Such accumulation and exaggeration of bodily details distinguishes the freak from the unmarked and unremarked ordinary body that claims through its very obscurity to be universal and normative.<sup>17</sup>

By labeling a person a freak, the sideshow takes away the humanity of the performer because he or she might not have the same physical characteristics of the “normal” person. Adams summarizes the phenomenon by claiming that “[l]abeling a person *freak* evacuates her from humanity, authorizing the paying customer to approach her as an object of curiosity and entertainment.”<sup>18</sup> To reconcile the exploitation of people who were different as curiosities worthy of admission price, society had only to take away the humanity of those individuals.

### **People with Cognitive Impairments in Sideshows**

Sideshows were not limited to the physically disabled, however, since some of the most popular performers had both physical and cognitive impairments. Some of P.T. Barnum’s most successful and famous exhibitions were those performers known as pinheads. The term

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13 Rachel Adams, *Sideshow U.S.A.: Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 6.

14 Adams, *Sideshows U.S.A.*, 9.

15 Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1997), 63.

16 Bogdan, 10.

17 Garland-Thomson, 60.

18 Adams, 10.

was used to label sideshow performers who had small heads throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Many of these people who were labeled as pinheads for the show had a medical condition called microcephaly in which the patient has a small skull, and thus, a smaller brain than the average person. Some people with microcephaly have normal intelligence, but most experience some level of mental retardation or cognitive delay. Additionally, many people with microcephaly also have characteristics of dwarfism and seizures, and though many performers who were labeled pinheads had microcephaly, not all were afflicted with the disease<sup>19</sup> The Aztec Children, the Wildmen of Borneo, the Wild Australian Children, Zip the What Is It?, and many other pinheads gained national fame through the sideshows and other media. All of these acts had smaller heads than the average person, and all except the Wildmen of Borneo had sloping foreheads common among individuals with microcephaly. The individuals categorized as pinheads were all purported to have been captured in wild lands outside of the civilized United States. This categorization assisted in stripping the humanity from people who were presented as unintelligent creatures that needed care from a “keeper,” much like animals at a zoo.<sup>20</sup>

The first known exhibition of people with microcephaly, the Aztec Twins, began in the mid-nineteenth century. While traveling in Central America in 1849, a Spanish trader named Ramon Selva discovered two small children in San Miguel, El Salvador, named Maximo and Bartola. The children were described as dwarfish and idiotic, and Selva convinced their mother that he would be able to cure the children if he was allowed to take them to the United States. When Selva returned to New York, he sold the children to the man who became their manager and owner and displayed them in freak shows up to the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>21</sup>

Publicity reports called Maximo and Bartola “the Last of the Ancient Aztecs” in an attempt to gain popularity for their mysterious backgrounds and heritage. To validate their history, their manager sold a booklet called *Life of the Living Aztec Children* which told the fabricated story of how he obtained the children for the sideshow. The booklet claimed that three adventurers came across the children as they were sitting as idols on an altar in an ancient Aztec city.<sup>22</sup> When the children were first exhibited in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1850 dressed in outfits with Aztec designs and feathers, they were an immediate success not only among the public but also with the scientific community.<sup>23</sup>

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19 National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, <http://www.ninds.nih.gov/disorders/microcephaly/microcephaly.htm>, accessed 11/23, 2012.

20 Robert Bogdan, “The Exhibition of People We Now Call Retarded,” in *Freak Show* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 119 – 146.

21 Phineas T. Barnum, *An Illustrated Catalogue And Guide Book To Barnum's American Museum* (New York : Wynkoop, Hallenbeck & Thomas, circa 1860).

22 Barnum's American Museum, “Illustrated memoir of an eventful expedition into Central America” (New York: Wynkoop, Hallenbeck & Thomas, printers, 1860).

23 Bogdan, 129.

One observer claimed that the public saw the children as “subjects deserving of careful scrutiny and thoughtful observation... they must be objects of vivid interest.”<sup>24</sup> The fact that the children seemed to be severely cognitively impaired was not addressed in the booklet that accompanied the exhibit or by observers. Their intelligence level, race, size, and other child-like aspects served only as a way to dehumanize Maximo and Bartola in their exhibition. An article from 1860 in the *New York Journal of Commerce* called them “the greatest curiosities of the human race ever seen in this country.” The author went on to say “they are human beings there can be no doubt; and they are not freaks of nature, but specimens of a dwindled, manikin race.”<sup>25</sup> Though this author did recognize their humanity, he continued to diminish them because of their race. Rather than addressing the impairment the children were born with, the public saw the exhibit as showcasing a previously undiscovered race of people.

Following the success of Maximo and Bartola, the next set of so-called twins that Barnum made famous was called the Wild Men of Borneo. As with the Aztec Twins, the Wild Men were provided with an elaborate origins story. Growing up on a farm in Ohio, Hiram and Barney Davis were neither wild nor from Borneo.<sup>26</sup> However, because the United States and the Netherlands contested for colonial control of Borneo in the mid-1800s, the Wild Men’s exhibitors chose this for their home country to raise curiosity. To create the façade of wildness, Hiram and Barney were renamed Waino and Plutano and were exhibited before painted jungle scenes and instructed to speak gibberish and snarl while wearing chains.<sup>27</sup> The men were around three feet and six inches tall, and they were called “dwarfs” and “imbeciles.” Accounts from people who met them described Hiram and Barney as “mentally deficient” and “mentally defective.”<sup>28</sup> When Lyman Warner appeared at the Davis home and offered to exhibit the boys in a freak show, the family initially refused to let them go; however, when Warner returned with a wash basin full of money, the boys’ mother decided that there would be more money and opportunities for Hiram and Barney in the freak show than at home.<sup>29</sup>

Around the same time as the Wild Men of Borneo, Barnum also exhibits the Wild Australian Children. Again, there was an elaborate story of the capture of the children from a near extinct and as-yet undiscovered race of people from an exotic land; however, Tom and Hettie were actually microcephalic siblings who were severely mentally retarded, and they were born in Ohio as opposed to Australia.<sup>30</sup> A pamphlet that accompanied them

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24 Ibid., 130.

25 From the *New York Journal of Commerce* as quoted in *Life of the Living Aztec Children*.

26 “Living Aztec Children,” 122.

27 “Exhibition of Wild Men” in the *New York Daily Times*, Aug 7, 1854; accessed through ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *The New York Times*.

28 Ibid., 122.

29 “Exhibition of Wild Men” in the *New York Daily Times*, Aug 7, 1854; accessed through ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *The New York Times*.

30 Bogdan, 120.

claimed that an adventurer and explorer named Captain Reid captured them in Australia. The pamphlet did not address their cognitive abilities but instead said that the children were “neither idiots, *lusus naturae* [meaning monsters or freaks of nature], nor any other aberration of humanity. But belonged to a distinct race hitherto unknown to civilization.”<sup>31</sup> The so-called children traveled with sideshows for at least thirty years and were therefore not considered children for most, if any, of their exhibited time. Their mental abilities and the characteristics of their exhibition instead categorized them as children.

Perhaps the most well-documented of P.T. Barnum’s popular exhibits was Zip the Pinhead, also sometimes called the “What Is It?”. His real name was William Henry Johnson, and he was born around 1840 in New Jersey.<sup>32</sup> His condition, both physically and mentally, is still disputed, but it is known that Johnson was small in stature, standing between four and five feet tall. Bogdan argues that today Johnson would surely be diagnosed as mentally retarded and microcephalic;<sup>33</sup> others argue that the shape of his head and his behavior are contrary to this diagnosis. Regardless, he was one of the most popular “freaks,” and he was exhibited during the peak of sideshow popularity from 1840 until his death in 1926.<sup>34</sup>

Johnson’s sister wrote an article that said he was recruited to the sideshow at the age of four. Johnson never spoke extensively about his past, and many times he was described as being incoherent when he did speak. However, one person who knew him in the circus life described him as “a pinhead, but fairly intelligent.”<sup>35</sup> The publicized story about Johnson, or Zip, claimed that he was captured along the River Gambia in Africa and brought to the United States. Johnson was an African-American with a dramatically pointed head, which when shaved was accentuated. He was often dressed in a monkey-suit to his neck and exhibited as a missing link between apes and humans.<sup>36</sup> Zip’s character went beyond the “wild” aspects of his past though, and he was presented as a clownish character who took part in many staged displays for publicity including boxing, playing the violin, and participating in a simulated marriage to a dwarf.<sup>37</sup> At his death, his sister claimed that Johnson could speak like an average person. She also claimed that his dying words were, “Well, we fooled ‘em for a long time, didn’t we?”<sup>38</sup> Many people of all backgrounds attended

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31 Bogdan, 120.

32 “ZIP, THE WHAT IS IT? TO QUIT THE CIRCUS: He’s 83 Now...” from the *New York Times*, Apr 11, 1926; pg. E19. Accessed through ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *The New York Times* (1851-2009).

33 Bogdan, 134.

34 “MANY CIRCUS FOLK AT ZIP’S FUNERAL: Aged Freak Buried Simply,” in *New York Times*; Apr 29, 1926; pg. 48. Accessed through ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *The New York Times* (1851-2009).

35 “AN OLD BARNUM BARKER” in *New York Times*, Nov 12, 1933; pg. X5. Accessed through ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *The New York Times* (1851-2009).

36 Bogdan, 132.

37 “GIANT THE BEST MAN AT MIDGET WEDDING” in *New York Times*, Apr 17, 1916; pg. 9. Accessed through ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *The New York Times* (1851-2009).

38 Marc Hartzman, *American Sideshow* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 50.

his funeral from the sideshow and the public, and the story of his death was published in twenty newspapers.<sup>39</sup>

In addition to the the Aztec Children, Wildmen of Borneo, The Wild Children of Australia, and Zip, there were many other performers with microcephaly and some degree of mental retardation who were exhibited in sideshows up to the beginning of World War II and the decline of the sideshow in general. Schlitzie the Pinhead, whose real name was Simon Metz, was another of Barnum's exhibits. His fame extended to film after his appearance in Tod Browning's 1932 film *Freaks*. Once sideshows began their decline, however, Simon Metz was placed in custodial institutional care.<sup>40</sup> At Coney Island in the early twentieth century, Pip and Flip were exhibited as Twins from the Yucatan and Wild Australian Children; in reality they were women with microcephaly. Their real names were Elvira Snow and Jennie Lee, and they were born in Georgia.<sup>41</sup> In 1910, two children called Aurora and Natali were also exhibited as ancient Aztec children, though photographs suggest that they were likely people with microcephaly as well.<sup>42</sup> By claiming that they were behaving as humane westerners caring for "freaks," the sideshow managers were able to reconcile the stories of wild races in unknown areas of the world with the docile and kind people who were exhibited.

In reviewing primary sources from the time period, the exhibition of people with cognitive impairments never seems to have been criticized by the medical community or physicians. Instead, many scientists and doctors accepted and assisted such displays as educational experiences, and they attended the exhibits along with the general public to examine and comment on the exhibits. Scientists studied the people in the exhibits and wrote articles about them, but none of the articles critique the study of people with disabilities.<sup>43</sup> The impact of the sideshow is visible in one book by J. Langdon Down who described microcephaly as "the Aztec type" in a medical text written in 1887.<sup>44</sup> In professional literature by influential scientists from the United States and Great Britain, the "so-called Aztecs" are referred to throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and as late as the 1930s, "Aztec-like" was a term for microcephaly.<sup>45</sup> By the 1930s, mental retardation became recognized as a medical condition, and the display of people with microcephaly was reduced. Rather than being amazed or intrigued by such "freaks," people were offended by the exhibitions and pitied those individuals on display.

39 "Zip, Barnum's Famous 'What Is It' Freak, Dies of Bronchitis in Bellevue; His Age Put at 84" in *New York Times*; Apr 25, 1926; pg. 1. Accessed through ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *The New York Times* (1851-2009).

40 Bogdan, 146.

41 Ibid., 142.

42 Ibid., 133.

43 Ibid., 121.

44 J. Langdon Down, *Mental Affections of Childhood and Youth* (London: J. & A. Churchill, 1887), pages 18, 19, and 72.

45 Charles Bernstein, "Microcephalic People Sometimes Called Pinheads" in *The Journal of Heredity*, Vol. 13, 1922, p 31.

In 1985, complaints voiced by concerned citizens prompted the New York State Fair's Sutton Sideshow attraction to be moved away from the midway of the park, and the term freak was no longer an acceptable term for people with disabilities in the amusement industry.<sup>46</sup> This solidified the belief that freakshows were crude, exploitative, and somewhat embarrassing to society; it has even been called the "pornography of disability."<sup>47</sup> Bogdan argued that the freakshow of the past is in decline because of low attendance, criticism from disability rights activists, and changing opinions and wants from their audiences.

When Robert Bogdan's book was published in 1988, the author argued that the freakshow was a dying exhibition style that would not be around for much longer for financial reasons and propriety's sake. The shift from "born different" to "self-made" freaks in sideshows and other displays is shown in the sideshows of Coney Island today, television shows, and movies. An article from the *Disability Quarterly Studies* in 2005 details the differences between those born with a disability and those who are "made freaks." Author Elizabeth Stephens states that

the contemporary freak body is in this way just like the normative model of the body found in 21<sup>st</sup>-century culture, a plastic and self-made construct, constantly transforming and re-inventing itself. The wonder and anxiety generated by the body of the self-made freak arises not from the randomness of its physical difference, as responses to the "born" freak did, but at its celebration of different capabilities and aesthetics<sup>48</sup>

Though the freakshow of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century seems to be a thing of the past, a reinvention of the show and its meaning has prevented the collapse of sideshow and freaks completely. In modern society, sideshows or exhibitions that exploit people with disabilities are generally looked down upon. Even though such blatant exploitation is not as prevalent in the United States as it was in past centuries, the impact that the past has had on the present situation is still evident.

## **The Disability Civil Rights Movement, the Americans with Disabilities Act, and Museums**

The special issue of the *Public Historian* from Spring 2005 was primarily concerned with disability and museums.<sup>49</sup> The articles range in subject matter from the historic home of Franklin D. Roosevelt to visually impaired visitor's experiences at a museum to reviews of various historical websites and books. This journal's firsthand accounts of people with disabilities and their experiences are striking. Their stories show society's lack of compassion and sensitivity toward people with disabilities and even a lack of awareness of their situation.

46 "Sideshow Freaks a Vanishing Act," in *Bangor Daily News*, August 26, 1985, 16.

47 Bogdan, 2.

48 Elizabeth Stephens, "Twenty-First Century Freak Show: Recent Transformations in the Exhibition of Non-Normative Bodies" in *Disability Quarterly Studies*, Summer 2005, Volume 25, No. 3.

49 *The Public Historian*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (Spring 2005) Special Issue on Disabilities.

Also missing from the literature was the inclusion of those who have learning, cognitive, or developmental disabilities. Since the implementation of the Americans with Disabilities Act, much of the focus has only been on wheelchair accessibility. Accessibility for the sight and hearing impaired has also been embraced, but in many cases, those with learning disabilities are forgotten. Compounding this issue of limited accessibility, many museums are small and short-staffed, and resources and training are not always readily available for all staff and volunteers.

As Arlene Mayerson wrote in her 1992 article “The History of the ADA: A Movement Perspective,” the Americans with Disabilities Act did not begin with the passing of legislation in 1990 by Congress; it began much earlier with the people and communities that fought against discrimination.<sup>50</sup> In legal terms, the shift towards disability equality began in 1973 when the Rehabilitation Act was passed, which banned discrimination based on disability for the receiving of federal funds.<sup>51</sup> Following this, the disability civil rights movement gained momentum, and in 1988, the Americans with Disabilities Act was first brought forward to Congress for consideration.<sup>52</sup> In 1990, the act was passed which gave rights to people with disabilities that had previously not been guaranteed by federal law. The law protects against disability discrimination in employment, public services, public accommodation, and services operated by private entities, transportation, and telecommunications.<sup>53</sup> Museums and historic sites are also included under ADA as public places. Regardless of size or income, museums have obligations to provide and to maintain accessibility for visitors with disabilities.

Though the progress toward inclusion of people with disabilities at museums and historic sites has advanced exponentially since the time of sideshows and the exhibition of people with disabilities for entertainment, there is still a long way to go.<sup>54</sup> There is room for researchers to investigate the creation of a model for museums and historic sites to use to better engage children with cognitive delay learning disabilities who are in special education classrooms. Such researchers could benefit from reviewing successful sites in New York City; correctly established, these programs could be beneficial to students, teachers, and museum professionals. Researchers in this area could go on to explore special education in secondary schools and how public history can relate to various communities of people with disabilities who have previously been underserved by the public history field.

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50 Arlene Mayerson, “The History of the ADA: A Movement Perspective” from the Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund, 1992. Available at: [http://dredf.org/publications/ada\\_history.shtml](http://dredf.org/publications/ada_history.shtml), accessed, January 10, 2013.

51 Section 504, Rehabilitation Act, 1973.

52 S. 2345, *Americans with Disabilities Bill in the 100th Congress, April 28, 1988*

53 The Americans with Disabilities Act, Public Law 101-336 (1990).

54 The Association of Science-Technology Centers provides an excellent resource for museum legal obligations for accessible practices. Additionally, the Museum Access Consortium in New York City, consisting of the Transit Museum, the Tenement Museum, and the Jewish Museum all serve as excellent examples of museums working to accommodate all people with disabilities at their museums and historic sites.

Currently, a severe lack of opportunities for people with special needs or learning disabilities exists, and in many cases, the complete nonexistence of programming for this group of people is striking. The museum community is largely embracing universal design, and creating museum exhibits that work for the largest audience at all times would help serve this community immensely. However, also creating specific programming to target audiences such as students with developmental or learning disabilities will be very beneficial. Measuring the success of these programs will be difficult because of special education curriculum requirements and the students' special needs, but through surveys of students and teachers and observable data, researchers will be able to make an assessment of the successes and failures of the programming.

The programs called for above will bring new audiences to museums, serve a new population in museums, involve a new community in the process, and provide more opportunities for students and museum staff. This could also possibly provide educational jobs and work service opportunities or volunteer experiences for students. Specialized programming has the potential to reach more students and families, spark other interests in students, inspire children, and teach students something new and worthwhile, while also providing social, educational, physical, and motor skill education to students. Compared to the way that people in the past were treated at museums or exhibitions, as exhibits themselves, these improvements to museum education are laudable. There is still a long way to go to make improvements universal and accepted, but the groundwork has been laid and conditions will continue to improve.

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