

P. Blanchard, N. Bancel, G. Boëtsch, É. Deroo, S. Lemaire, C. Forsdick (eds), *Human Zoos: Science and Spectacle in the Age of Colonial Empires*, 2008 (Liverpool University Press: Liverpool)

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This recent collection of essays on the display of human otherness moves beyond the wave of freak show literature of the 1980s and '90s, and seeks to provide a more comprehensive overview of this peculiar exhibitionary practice. The display of the exotic Other for entertainment, education, and supposedly the advancement of scientific knowledge, occurred in numerous guises throughout imperial nations in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The strength of the volume lies in its scope – in terms of time and place, the historical characters and stories that emerge, and the disciplinary approaches that its contributors utilise – all of which make *Human Zoos* a valuable resource, particularly to those concerned with the production and representation of human difference.

As the mixed reaction to the 2002 French volume indicated, this collection reflects an attempt by postcolonial scholars to “explore the interconnectedness of colonial past and postcolonial present”, regardless of how comfortably this fits with the collective memory of a nation.ⁱ Whilst providing a necessary history of the popularisation of racist ideas, *Human Zoos* also serves to highlight the remarkable travel of people and ideas as spatial and temporal barriers were broken down through the display of the exotic Other. The use of contemporary newspapers, publicity and public debate effectively recreates a sense of the rhetoric that surrounded the exhibitions, and points to how human difference was both spectacularised and internalised by visitors seeking to formulate their national identity.

Divided into three broad sections, the essays seek to identify, define, theorise and historicise the human zoo, whilst outlining the patterns of its evolution.ⁱⁱ The first section – entitled ‘Histories and Definitions’ – will seem familiar to scholars of the nineteenth century freak show. Contributions from Rosemarie Garland Thomson and Robert Bogdan successfully summarise their well-known monographs, and the stories of the ‘Hottentot Venus’ and P.T. Barnum’s display of Joice Heth are retold and placed within a wider context.ⁱⁱⁱ Yet this section does more than introduce the history of human display, and also includes geographical context (Durbach and Blanchard [et al] on popular racism in London and France), an exhibitionary framework (Corbey on ethnographic exhibits, Deroo on otherness in film), and a scientific perspective (Boëtsch and Ardagna on anthropology). Part one of the volume clearly indicates that there was more to the human zoo than the nineteenth century travelling freak show, and clarifies the editors’ introductory statement that the human zoo cannot be defined as a specific category, but must instead be seen as “a pattern and a process”.^{iv}

The second section – ‘Populations on Display’ – examines frequently displayed groups and popular sites of exhibition. These essays demonstrate that human zoos were fundamental to the visitor’s understanding of the Other’s place in the world – and thus their own – and that the industrial and colonial culture of the host nation shaped these perceptions.^v Blier’s essay entitled ‘Meeting the Amazons’ reveals that the African female warriors were integral to shaping millions of Westerners’ understandings of race, gender and national identity at the turn of the twentieth century. Whilst in European countries this was determined by colonial interests, in the United States the Dahomeyan women were interpreted within the context of slavery and segregation. The international perspective of this volume gives a valuable insight into the differing motivations, rhetorical devices and contemporary circumstances utilised by organisers of human displays, which highlights the various needs and expectations that those on display were compelled to fulfil.

The third section – ‘The Human Zoo in Context’ – continues to emphasise the multinational aspect by discussing the imperial aspirations of certain nations, and the exhibition of colonial subjects that accompanied them. These essays clearly attempt to confirm one of the key arguments put forward by the volume’s editors; that exhibitions of the exotic were not just a consequence of imperialism, but were also one of the “cultural conditions which made it possible”, as the demonstration of supposedly inferior peoples justified oppressive activities.^{vi}

Although the brevity of the essays, the slightly uneven international focus, and occasional repetition makes the volume somewhat difficult to read cover to cover, the overall contribution *Human Zoos* makes to a number of fields cannot be overlooked. The interdisciplinary aspect – with contributors from history, anthropology, sociology and material culture – serves to highlight the diverse models of display, which fused science and spectacle to create peculiar exhibitionary characters. As several reviewers have noted, the lack of an index is perhaps a structural oversight. However *Human Zoos* has a lot to offer to readers from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds – from postcolonial studies to museology, from freak show scholars to critical race studies – and will serve to broaden their conceptual and topical limits. *Human Zoos* perhaps works best as an introduction to further study for those interested in the forms and consequences of exotic shows, and the extensive bibliography and brief summaries of key works and events effectively facilitate this. For those engaged with the study of the Black Atlantic, the collection can provide an insight into a particular form of cross-cultural interaction, and demonstrates the way in which black cultures were scripted and performed throughout the Atlantic world in the imperial age.

ⁱ P. Blanchard, N. Bancel, G. Boëtsch, É. Deroo, S. Lemaire, C. Forsdick (eds.), *Human Zoos: Science and Spectacle in the Age of Colonial Empires* (Liverpool, 2008), p.392.

ⁱⁱ C. Forsdick, ‘Postface: Situating Human Zoos’, in P. Blanchard (et al) (eds.), *Human Zoos*, p.377.

ⁱⁱⁱ See R.G. Thomson (ed.), *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (New York, 1996), and R. Bogdan, *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (Chicago, 1988).

^{iv} P. Blanchard (et al), ‘Human Zoos: The Greatest Exotic Shows in the West’, in P. Blanchard (et al) (eds.), *Human Zoos*, p.23.

^v Ibid, p.24.

^{vi} Ibid, p.15.