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Andrea Stulman Dennett. *Weird and Wonderful: The Dime Museum in America.* New York: New York University Press, 1997. xiv + 200 pp. $21.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8147-1886-5; $65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-1885-8.

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While the history of nineteenth century popular culture has recently come to life with studies of the minstrel show and burlesque, the dime museum has largely remained a mystery. In *Weird and Wonderful*, Andrea Stulman Dennett finally brings the dime museum's rich history out of the shadows. Popular between 1841 and 1900, the dime museum marketed an eclectic range of entertainment, including freak shows, melodramas and pseudo-scientific exhibits, to a diverse audience. The roots of the dime museum's mixture of education and amusement lie in America's first museums of the late 18th century. Without endowments, early museums, such as Charles Willson Peale's American museum in Philadelphia, frequently included entertainment to draw more people in to see the collections of scientific displays and listen to lectures on natural history and art. These early museums gave way to alternate institutions: the endowed museum as a site of scientific learning (such as the Smithsonian, founded in 1841) and the dime museum, a commercial venue of entertainments with only half-hearted (and often deliberately deceptive) educational ideals.

Though he is best-known for his circus career, Phineas Taylor Barnum was actually the central figure in the establishment of dime museums. After purchasing his first dime museum in New York City in 1841, Barnum established a formula for success that entertainment entrepreneurs copied throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century. He appeased those who were critical of theatrical amusements on moral and religious grounds by touting the educational benefits of his museum; he eliminated drinking from his establishment along with lewd remarks on stage to attract women and children; and by offering diverse entertainment (and changing his exhibits of curiosities often) he recruited patrons of varied backgrounds, many of whom attended again and again. According to Dennett, dime museum pioneers such as Barnum shaped a novel institution in American popular entertainment: a collection of diverse entertainments under one roof that was accessible to families of diverse classes.

Dime museums incorporated wax displays, film and variety entertainment, but the dime museum's most significant contribution to the content of American popular culture was to "introduce and standardize the freak show" (p. 134). Dennett describes how the dime museum's freak shows made many "human anomalies" rich and famous (p. 137). Charles Stratton, the legendary "General Tom Thumb," owned a yacht and a house in Bridgeport Connecticut (p. 69). Yet Dennett also uncovers the grim aspects of freaks' dime museum careers: managers often manipulated their private lives (with arranged marriages between incongruous pairs of freaks, for example) and enforced gruelling work schedules as well.

Dime museums, as Dennett shows, were immersed in the social issues of the second half of the nineteenth century. The plays in dime museum theaters frequently advocated moral reforms, such as temperance, and museum exhibits, such as Barnum's "half-man-half-monkey" displays (p. 30), were linked with scientific questions of the day, namely new theories of evolution.

The dime museum declined around 1900, in the face of competition from vaudeville and film, but Dennett finds traces of the dime museum throughout contemporary popular culture, from the talk show (which, according to Dennett, places psychological, rather than physical freaks on display) to the tattoo parlor.

The strength of this book lies in Dennett's descriptions of the appearance and spatial organization of specific dime museums and the business side of dime museum history. After piecing together elusive and scarce documentation of the dime museum, she has reconstructed the interior and exterior of many dime museums for readers and also uncovered the financial struggles that dime museum owners faced.

Less compelling, however, is Dennett's analysis of the cultural and social significance of the dime museum. For example, while Dennett notes that female freaks (such as

bearded ladies) questioned "the dominance of men" she overlooks the ways this point contradicts her claims that freaks enforced narrow definitions of "normal" (in this case, proper femininity) and that these female performers were objectified for the sexual titillation of spectators (p. 83). In addition, when Dennett discusses the popularity of temperance melodrama and the dramatic adaptations of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in dime museums she overlooks the significance of these plays in the rise of a feminine popular culture as well as their relationship to women's dominance in the temperance movement.

Along with *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, other acts in dime museums focused on race, such as Barnum's display of Joice Heth, an elderly black woman whom he advertised as George Washington's nurse, and exhibits of a mentally impaired black man, William Henry Johnson, under the title "What Is It?" (p. 31). Despite these examples, Dennett does not fully consider the racial politics of the dime museum. She points to Barnum's use of Heth only as an example of his successful publicity campaigns and surprisingly refers to Johnson's act as Barnum's avoidance of the "politically charged discourse of African Americans" (p. 31). Eric Lott, on the other hand, argues that urban entertainments of the nineteenth century were preoccupied with race relations.[1] The blackface minstrel show, popular in the 1840s and 1850s, often found an outlet in dime museums and Barnum, Lott claims, was fascinated with exploring blackness, even performing in blackface himself.[2] Unfortunately, the minstrel show, one of the dime museum's chief competitors, receives scant attention in *Weird and Wonderful*.

Dennett's celebration of the dime museum as democractic also deserves reconsideration. She emphasizes that the larger museums were "extremely democratic," with "heterogeneous, multiethnic, and interclass" audiences (p. 124). However, as David Nasaw argues in *Going Out*, the collection of diverse groups in a theater often depended on the segregation of African Americans within the auditorium or the outright exclusion of African American customers in the late nineteenth century.[3] In *Weird and Wonderful* Dennett does not address the dime museum's position on racial segregation.

Although Dennett has left some questions unanswered, she has recovered much of the lost world of the dime museum and traced its legacy in twentieth century American culture as well.

Notes

[1]. Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 76-79.

[2]. Lott, 77.

[3]. David Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), chapter 5, "The 'Indecent' Others."

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