H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Bernth Lindfors, ed. *Africans on Stage: Studies in Ethnological Show Business.* Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999. xvi + 302 pp. $19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-21245-0; $42.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-33468-8.

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Published on H-AfrLitCine (November, 1999)

In *Africans on Stage: Studies in Ethnological Show Business*, editor Bernth Lindfors explores the under researched area of ethnological show business through a collection of essays which focus on the, "displaying of foreign peoples for commercial and/or educational purposes" (p. vii). The essays in this volume raise questions of control, appropriation and power by focusing debate on the politics and imperatives that underlie the act of depiction. Certainly, the works prod the reader to consider who has the right to depict the culture of a society and what responsibilities are inherent in assuring that the society is portrayed in an accurate manner?

Africans on Stage deals with a wide variety of aspects of ethnographical show business by considering how the African showpeople, both real and counterfeit, as well as the roles played by managers, impresarios and audiences, contributed to the shaping of European and American perceptions of Africans in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries" (p. ix-x). As several of the contributors suggest, Africa came to symbolize, in the traditions of European and American societies, a mythological space that was waiting for its illumination by white society. This mythos, which has become so ingrained in our societies, obscures the violence done to African peoples and cultures by western cultural traditions that, as Françoise Pfaff describes it, continues to mystify, misinform and mislead viewers about complex African realities [1]. A volume of this nature is critical to furthering the discussion on the origin of what might be described as the western gaze on Africa and, although occasionally uneven, *Africans on Stage* does successfully break new ground in the debate surrounding colonial attitudes and imagery.

The book is comprised of ten chapters presented in chronological order according to the dates of the exhibitions or performances they discuss. Many of the essays were originally presented at an interdisciplinary panel on "African Show Business" convened in recent years at the annual conference of the African Studies Association. The interdisciplinarity of the volume which draws from diverse contributors including historians, art critics, musicologists, literary scholars, anthropologists, folklorists and freelance writers is one of its greatest strengths. This diversity is further enhanced by Lindfors editorial strategy of seeking out unique approaches rather than enforcing uniformity in terms of the subject matter (p. x).

The volume offers several interesting perspectives on the role played by the white entrepreneurs who exhibited Africans and others in Britain and America. For example, in his essay, "Africa Meets the Great Farini," Shane Peacock provides a biographical account of Canadian entrepreneur, William Leonard Hunt. Under the name Farini, Hunt managed Zulu and San exhibits in England and America from 1879 to the mid-1880s and published a book entitled *Through the Kalahari Desert* in which he claims to have stumbled across the ruins of an ancient African civilization, "in a place where history records no such African culture" (p. 100). Farini's flair for exaggeration and outright deception was designed, as Peacock suggests, to jolt his audience and evoke their most intense emotions (p. 86). Farini's ability to sensationalize was deliberately cultivated on his part as a strategy to attract audiences to his shows. Recognizing western civilization's deep fascination for the "Dark Continent," Farini exploited the spectacle Africa provided to its fullest extent whether he was exhibiting its peoples or fabricating a legendary civilization situated in one of its most mysterious regions (p. 100). Interestingly, Peacock deals with the issue of Farini's complex and contradictory attitude towards Africans by demonstrating that although it might appear liberal for the time, in the end "his showman's skills brought African people to the forefront in an explosive way, not necessarily to be looked down upon, but unfortunately, not to be considered equals either" (p. 102).

Harvey Blume offers quite a different approach to the issue of white entrepreneurship in his contribution entitled, "Ota Benga and the Barnum Perplex." Blume, whose aim is to reclaim P.T. Barnum as a postmodern

phenomenon, contextualizes the continuing impact of the legendary showman's strategies by examining their under explored effect on the culture of human display (p. 188). Blume's notion of Barnumism, which is described as a blend of display and the claim of authenticity is applied as a critique of the exhibition of the Pygmy, Ota Benga in the orangutan cage at the Bronx Zoo in 1906. A publicity stunt which combined a sign depicting Ota Benga's vital statistics as if he were just another zoo attraction, gave the spectacle spurious scientific authenticity (p. 192-93). This strategy resulted in an outpouring of audience interest that ironically did not diminish once Ota Benga was released from the cage and allowed to roam the zoo grounds at will.

One of the most interesting contentions in the article is Blume's assertion that Barnumism is everywhere today and exists in various levels from a low form which includes television talk show programs to a high form which can be exemplified by Los Angeles's Museum of Jurassic Technology which houses a "varying display of natural and manufactured objects" in which the exhibits are sometimes completely true and sometimes completely false (p. 200). Blume suggests that Barnumism blurs the line between fact and fiction and often does so in such a successful fashion that we never question the authenticity of the claim.

An intriguing aspect of the volume is the way in which some of the essays deal with the nature and ramifications of western viewer reception. For example, the essay "Charles Dickens and the Zulus" by Bernth Lindfors explores the viewing of a troupe of Zulus who performed in London in 1853. By juxtaposing passages from Charles Dickens' essay, "The Noble Savage" written by the famous author after viewing the "Zulu Kafir Exhibition" with excerpts from C.H. Caldecott's lecture and pamphlet on the exhibit, Lindfors raises some provocative issues. Unfortunately these are sometimes obscured by a stylistic irony that is difficult to separate from his serious points. In particular, Lindfors seems to suggest that it is misguided to blame the Victorians for being ethnocentric because of the historical context within which the troupe was viewed. Arguing that "there were no documentary films or television specials to bring more accurate images of foreign peoples to the drawing rooms of London" (p. 77), Lindfors creates a contradiction within the essay when he later blasts modern media for continuing to rely on Victorian stereotypes. Given the question of Lindfors' confrontational style, it is difficult to determine whether or not he is serious in his desire to recoup Dickens as a poor misguided Victorian who is no more than a product of his age. An example of this occurs when Lindfors asserts that Dickens refrained from demanding the extermination of such peoples as the Zulus in favor of the project of "civilizing" their culture to death. Such phrasing seems to suggest that cultural genocide is not as permanent and as debilitating as outright eradication of peoples, a position challenged by post-independence experiences of various African nations. Perhaps more to the point, although Lindfors does contextualize Victorian attitudes to a degree, he fails to place them within a colonial context that recognizes the subjugation and degradation of African peoples as part of a strategy to justify the continued existence of the British Empire. Even with these failings, Lindfors' essay succeeds in creating an environment of debate.

"Darkest Africa': African Shows at America's World Fairs, 1893-1940" by Robert W. Rydell considers the ideological underpinnings of reception and looks at how these reinforce differing cultural imperatives. Through a contrast of attitudes evidenced by America's Victorian-era fairs and those held during the Great Depression, Rydell demonstrates an evolution of attitude and stereotypes that supported an environment of racism. He suggests that displays of Africans during the Victorian-era fairs served the purpose of ideological repair by hastening "the process of American national reconciliation at the expense of people of color, especially African Americans" (p. 135). Such displays during the Great Depression continued reinforced stereotypes that lent legitimacy to segregation, but, in addition, "their primary emphasis shifted to provide support for American economic penetration of the African continent" (pp. 136-7). Rydell's acknowledgment of America's economic imperialism of the African continent exposes a little explored aspect of the relations between Africa and America since colonial interests are most often viewed within a European context.

Perhaps one of the most illuminating sections of this essay involves the discussion of African showpeople's resistance to their representations by show promoters. For example, Dahomeyan women performers in the Dahomeyan Village at the 1893 Chicago World's Columbian Exposition demonstrated a complex understanding of their exploitation. During the performance of a Dahomeyan chant, rather than praising America as expected, the women were understood to utter the following: "'We have come from a far country to a land where all men are white. If you will come to our country we will take pleasure in cutting your white throats."' (p. 145). Rydell's inclusion of this incident, and others like it, offers the rare opportunity to glimpse the experience of human display from the subjects themselves.

Resistance to oppression is reflected in other contributions to the volume. For example, in "Bata Kindai Amgoza Ibn LoBagola and the Making of "An African Savage's Own Story,'" David Killingray and Willie Henderson offer a compelling account of the life of Joseph Howard Lee. An African American born in Baltimore in 1887, who changed his name to Bata Kindai Amgoza Ibn LoBagola and claimed an African origin through the autobiography, *An African Savage's Own Story* and lectures, LoBagola evidenced a grasp of showmanship and manipulation that allowed him to circumvent some barriers normally insurmountable for African Americans at the time.

Arguing that much of LoBagola's autobiography is clearly imaginary and false "geographically, ethnographically, linguistically, and chronologically" (p. 231), the authors suggest that his exotic background "appears to be the one that he had carefully developed and assumed over the years in peddling his craft as street entertainer and public lecturer" (p. 232). The question of authenticity and the fact LoBagola transformed his ordinary life into an extraordinary one raises, for the authors, "interesting questions about autobiography and about who can have a 'life' or distinctive voice in the historical record" (p. 229). Certainly, the pretense of being an African benefitted LoBagola as he was able, to some degree, to mitigate the effects of the "Jim Crow" laws (p. 253), which, in itself, speaks volumes about the historical context in which his deception took place. In the end, the authors underscore that the autobiography, regardless of its authenticity, contributes to the discussion of black lived experience (p. 229).

The nature of black experience and its recoupment is one of the central concerns of Z. S. Strother's contribution, "Display of the Body Hottentot." Strother deftly outlines the history of Hottentot visual representation in illustrated travelogues and early ethnological literature from the fifteenth to mid-eighteenth centuries, thus providing the necessary context for her discussion of the 1810-15 exhibition of Sara Baartman, the "Hottentot Venus." Existing literature deconstructs the scientific and philosophical assumptions surrounding Sara Baartman [2] but what is especially refreshing about this essay is its art history approach which focuses on the deconstruction of Hottentot iconography within the social, political and cultural contexts of the representations. Strother takes her analysis even further by describing how contemporary women artists of color have "been concerned to reappropriate Baartman's life and voice" (p. 38) in order to address black women's representation. In particular, she discusses Renée Green's mixed media installation *Sa Main Charmante* (1989) which forces the viewer to "acknowledge one's position as voyeur" (p. 38). This is indeed an interesting reversal of power since regardless of the media involved, the act of looking is so taken for granted that many of us do not question the ideological underpinnings of our gaze, nor do we question our right to look as we see fit. Although this is slowly changing in society through media literacy and general skepticism about the accuracy of our images, there nevertheless remains certain conventions that have become part of the western psyche regardless of their ability to misrepresent and misconstrue the subjects being viewed.

As this sampling of essays suggests, *Africans on Stage* succeeds in laying bare the issues of storytelling, spectacle, sensation and commodification of human experience in a context that questions the validity of exhibiting human beings as objects. In the end, the book's interdisciplinarity makes it a viable volume for many different applications including performing, visual and other fine arts, where such material is in short supply.

Notes

[1]. Francoise Pfaff, "Hollywood's Die-Hard Jungle Melodramas" in *Africa and the Centenary of Cinema/L'Afrique et le Centenaire du Cinema.* Ed. FEPACI, Paris: Presence Africaine, p. 197.

[2] See, for example, Sander Gilman, "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine and Literature." *Critical Inquiry* 12.1 (1985): 204-42.

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Citation: Sheila Petty. Review of Lindfors, Bernth, ed., *Africans on Stage: Studies in Ethnological Show Business.* H-AfrLitCine, H-Net Reviews. November, 1999.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3600

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