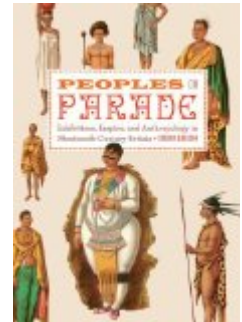


Sadiah Qureshi. *Peoples on Parade: Exhibitions, Empire, and Anthropology in Nineteenth-Century Britain.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011. 382 S. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-226-70096-0.



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Published on H-Empire (January, 2014)

Commissioned by Charles V. Reed (Elizabeth City State University)

It is easy to caricature nineteenth-century racial discourse as consisting of essentializing notions underpinned by intense cultural chauvinism. However, to do so risks ignoring one crucial question: why, from about the 1840s onwards, was there such an intense fascination with questions of human variety and racial classification? In *Peoples on Parade: Exhibitions, Empire, and Anthropology in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, Sadiah Qureshi examines the production, promotion, reception, and interpretation of ethnographic displays in nineteenth-century London, in order to explore the role that racial discourse played in wider public debates about public policy and the nature of scientific knowledge.

Traditionally, in scholarly studies of ethnographic displays, much attention has been paid to the manner in which such exhibitions aestheticize the bodies of the performers. Critical comment on exhibitions of displayed peoples tends to view them as spectacles, attending primarily to their function as means of staging and exaggerating cultural difference through the presentation of

the non-European body as a deviation from the anatomical norm.[1]

Although there can be no doubt that carefully curated displays of dancing, hunting techniques, and other supposedly “authentic” cultural practices were bound up with popular notions of what constituted “savage” behavior and its opposition to nineteenth-century ideas of “civilization,” Qureshi illustrates how these shows were also valued for their educational function. Through the examination of a broad range of printed sources—from promotional posters and exhibition guidebooks, to “scientific” ethnological works and popular travel writing—Qureshi presents the shows as sites in which topical events which generated and stimulated public discussions on numerous issues, including foreign policy, missionary activity, and slavery, could be presented and debated. For example, accompanying a display of southern African San or “bushman” people in London in May 1847, was a lecture by the anatomist and materialist Robert Knox. Knox’s lecture took place in Exeter Hall, where the London Missionary Society

held its annual conference; he used his living exhibits as material “proof” of his racial theories to launch a stinging attack on attempts by the British government to ameliorate the conditions of indigenous peoples on the Cape and elsewhere, and also to put forward his own political vision of a British foreign policy on the Cape based on trade rather than land-grabbing expansionism. Furthermore, Qureshi’s exhaustive examination of newspaper and ephemera collections has also revealed the role that shows played in the development and dissemination of anthropological and ethnological theories. By bringing visual and textual materials into the same analytic field, Qureshi reveals how typological representations of different racial groups drawn from ethnological works were disseminated to a very broad section of the public. Particularly illuminating is Qureshi’s discussion of Robert Latham and Edward Forbes Court of Natural History at the Crystal Palace in Sydenham from 1854-66. The court was split into different geographical areas, with the flora and fauna of each area displayed in a series of tableaux. Not only, Qureshi argues, did the Natural History Court provide a three-dimensional encyclopedia of zoology and ethnology, but the various civilizations on display were arranged visually to illustrate the development of the earth and the progress of humanity. Thus, a walk through the court exposed the visitor to a narrative of asynchronous human development, a visual representation of the ways in which evolutionary theory was being utilized, in the mid-nineteenth century, to institute what anthropologist Johannes Fabian has famously termed the “denial of covalness,” situating non-European peoples in a more primitive phase of evolutionary development than their European counterparts.[2] As well as examining the role of ethnographic displays as what Richard Altick in *The Shows of London* (1978) has called “rational entertainment,” Qureshi also explores the vexed relationship between the performers and their “managers.” Entangled in any examination of this are questions

of agency: how far were performers able to decide the terms under which they performed, and how did they come to be in Britain in the first instance? As Qureshi acknowledges, these questions are difficult to answer, not least because performers left very few records of their time in Britain. Thus, records of encounters primarily by reviewers, contracts, and anecdotes become the means through which the historian is able to recover traces of the ways in which displayed peoples were able to assert themselves by either objecting to their treatment, or demanding that to which they felt entitled or inclined. A particular illuminating account of a pay dispute between a Zulu leader and the merchant who had speculatively paid to have him and his family brought to London and displayed, indicates that an arbitrator was brought in to oversee the distribution of profits to the satisfaction of both parties. However, the recruitment of performers from prisons in southern Africa and India indicates that not all performers had the power to negotiate their terms, and many more were brought over by traders who obtained permissions from local magistrates, with little evidence of informed consent on the part of the people themselves. As diverse as the ways in which displayed people came to be in Britain were the motivations of their “managers” for bringing them in the first instance. Some, such as George Catlin, who brought two American Indian groups to Europe in the 1840s, had a political motive. Catlin had grown up among the Indians and, in addition to profiting financially, also wished to inform audiences about Indian culture in order to campaign on behalf of endangered groups. Others, such as Mr. George, who was in charge of two San “bushman” children in 1853, were motivated by religious convictions. Mr. George hoped to display to the public the pair’s conversion to Christianity in order that they might be sent back amongst their people as native missionaries. Some of Qureshi’s most striking archival recoveries are those anecdotes from newspapers documenting encounters between

performers and their audiences. These “unscripted” interactions disabuse us of any notion that the audiences at these shows were passive spectators. From accounts of women holding San “bushman” babies in 1847, to the moral outcry of the *Daily Mail* at the idea that southern African men should be taking rides round Hyde Park with English ladies in 1899, Qureshi has gathered an array of intercultural encounters that suggest that English people interacted with the foreign performers to a far greater extent, and in many more surprising ways, than previously been thought.

Given the intimacy of some of the encounters described, it is somewhat surprising that Qureshi has not thought more about communication during these encounters. Just how did performers make themselves intelligible to audiences with whom they had no shared language? And what role did the managers or “guardians” play as interpreters or interlocutors between audiences and performers? Given the centrality of philology to ethnology, with many mid-nineteenth-century ethnologists such as James Cowles Prichard viewing language as the defining difference between man and animal, it would have also been helpful to have some discussion of how the native languages of the performers were represented in popular accounts of the exhibitions described. Qureshi also acknowledges that after spending a season in London, the vast majority of exhibitions of displayed peoples went on to tour the provinces for months, sometimes years. However, she has not included any accounts of the promotion or reception of these shows outside of London. Given the range of audience responses gathered from the London reviews, it would have been interesting to see if there was any difference between the ways in which audiences reacted outside of London, in small market towns and also other industrial cities such as Liverpool and Manchester, places which also hosted a number of very popular exhibitions of foreign peoples.

Quibbles aside, this is both a formidable work of scholarship and an extremely engaging read, that is essential reading for anyone with any interest in nineteenth-century anthropology, museology, or popular perceptions of race and empire.

Notes

[1]. The most famous example of this was Sara Baartman, the “Hottentot Venus” who was displayed in London and Paris between 1810 and 1814. There is a substantial body of literature covering Baartman’s time in Europe. See, for example, Clifton Crais and Pamela Scully, *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus: A Ghost Story and a Biography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009); Pascal Blanchard and Gilles Boëtsch, “The Hottentot Venus: Birth of a ‘Freak’ (1815),” in *Human Zoos: Science and Spectacle in the Age of Empire*, ed. Pascal Blanchard, Nicolas Banchel, Gilles Boëtsch, Eric Deroo, Sandrine Lemaire, and Charles Forsdick (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), 62-71; Z. S. Strother, “Display of the Body Hottentot,” in *Africans on Stage: Studies in Ethnological Show Business*, ed. Bernth Lindfors (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1999), 1-61.

[2]. Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001 [1983]), 25.

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Citation: Lara Atkin. Review of Qureshi, Sadiah. *Peoples on Parade: Exhibitions, Empire, and Anthropology in Nineteenth-Century Britain*. H-Empire, H-Net Reviews. January, 2014.

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