FREAKS IN PUBLIC : READING THE FREAKISH IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN LITERATURE AND CULTURE


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The presence of freaks in American literary texts, particularly as they re-emerge in late 20th century works, articulate a complex set of relationships that define what Elizabeth Grosz calls "acceptable, tolerable, knowable humanity" played out by audiences and actors on a national stage (55). This dissertation investigates the freak as a figure of critical potential for both reclamation and appropriation through feminist, queer, and disability studies lenses. It tracks the shifting relationships between "freaks" and U.S. national culture, illustrating how the freak serves as a powerful figure that disrupts binary logics and expands the knowable limits of public life. However, it also recognizes that the power of the freak is double-edged, illustrating how the resurgence of freak shows in the postmodern cultural landscape has also enabled the appropriation of freakishness by "norms" through the same powerful logics of exceptional individualism and diverse pluralism that configure the freak show as a "freaktopia."