

## Slights and Slants: Visual Representation in *Carnivàle*

By: Moe Folk

Despite being canceled after only two seasons on HBO (2003-2005), *Carnivàle* blossomed into a bona fide cult hit thanks to wider exposure upon its recent DVD release. Initially, the cancellation of the series two seasons into a planned six-season odyssey provoked such ire that fans unleashed a barrage of 50,000 emails, prompting HBO Chairperson Chris Albrecht to complain to the press, “Never have we gotten besieged the way we have been besieged by *Carnivàle* fans for deciding not to go on with the third season of that show” (“*Carnivàle* fans besiege HBO”). The show, a twisted *mélange* of intense characterization, historical realism, and Lynchian magic realism, met with good critical response and even garnered many awards, including an ASCAP Award for Top TV Series.

Paradoxically, the reason for the cancellation was also one of the main reasons fans enjoyed the show: the immense cost of keeping true to its staging in the Dust Bowl of Depression-era America. Albrecht said, “If [the show] cost only \$2 million an hour we'd keep going with it” (“*Carnivàle* fans besiege HBO”), but Daniel Knauf, the creator and main author of the series, said the show couldn't have been done for less than its \$3.5 million per episode budget. In addition to a large ensemble cast, Knauf cited the complexities involved with trying to create a realistic picture of 1930s America:

[E]veryone has to be dressed in period-correct clothing (sometimes hundreds of extras). Cars, locations, sets, props—everything has to be purchased used, rented or meticulously replicated. Much of it takes place outside. That means very few standing sets ...Generators and lights for day and night shooting. Sound problems due to wind and misdirected cars and long delays every time a plane flies overhead. (“Save the Show”)

While this meticulous attention to historical detail drew viewers, many fans also cited the perceived “differentness” of the show from its contemporaries in terms of bodies and how they were displayed. Posts such as the following are common on *Carnivàle* message boards:

It's a tribute to the quality of the show and its creators, writers, and actors that we have been able to cast aside the usual classifications and categories in which we so often tend to divide and judge others and can see these characters simply as people, and not people of particular colors, sizes, genders or creeds. Very few shows and films have been capable of erasing those lines. It's something those involved in its making should take great pride in. (Delenn)

But does the show really erase those culturally situated stereotypes or does it continue to represent them in harmful ways? Considering the show features thousands of bodies during its nearly 24 hours of aired content, answering that question definitively is about as impossible as trying to explain the supernatural powers also at work in the show; instead, given a complex show and a complex problem, I will examine a few overarching areas of representation: variant bodies, non-white bodies, and female bodies.

## Portrayals of the Body in *Carnivàle*

To begin, how does the show itself “officially” deal with the representation of variant bodies? The HBO series summary states that the show follows a traveling carnival across Dust Bowl America, but focuses on only two people—Ben Hawkins (played by Nick Stahl) and Brother Justin (played by Clancy Brown)—both of whom happen to be of common body type (“About the Show”). No other characters are mentioned by name or even alluded to. By contrast, the Season 1 publicity photo circulated by HBO (and used on the Season 1 DVD cover) focuses on the variant bodies of sideshow performers. The disparate nature of the “visual description” versus the textual description leads one to conclude the image is meant to be arresting in the sense of what Robert Bogdan has termed the “pornography of disability” (2). While the photo still portrays main characters such as Ben and Brother Justin in a prominent manner, fourteen of the carnival performers/crew are also pictured in prominent ways, including some who do not have substantive roles in the series. For example, Gecko (portrayed by John Fleck) is a lizard man who has a small role. On the series, he is seen with brown, flaking skin, but he has a decided greenish tint in the photo, ostensibly to stand out amidst the brown, dusty palette of the background and the tan skin of the others. In a similar vein, conjoined twins Caledonia and Alexandria (portrayed by Sarah and Karyn Steben, respectively) are prominently displayed in front of characters who play key roles in the series. Finally, Samson, the de facto manager and ex-dwarf-strongman played by Michael Anderson, stands on top of a truck and scans the horizon in a gesture that may be his way of finding his bearing, but also serves to silhouette his tiny frame against the sky and juxtaposes it with that of the other characters.

The prominence of variant bodies used as “eye candy” is ingrained into the show as well, and creates a common visual theme across its two seasons. The representations of bodily variant characters—despite claims of ingenuity and novelty made on their behalf by many fans—often re-inscribe the “medical model” of pathology identified by Jessica Evans, a mode of representing disabled people that “emphasizes individual loss or incapacities—implying that the impairment is what limits or defines the whole person” (274). Further, the medical model posits that the impairment is the reason the person has not adapted to “society as it is” (Evans 274), which the common-bodied spectator then internalizes thus: “There is a causal relationship between the inner pathology of the individual and his or her external, visible characteristics” (Evans 278). This idea is echoed by Stuart Hall, who said, “The body is a text and we are all readers of it.” To continue Hall’s metaphor, the portrayals in *Carnivàle* offer texts ranging from pulp novels to Shakespeare.

Further, some would say the very act of portraying variant bodies in a sideshow is about as groundbreaking as portraying slaves toiling in the fields of an antebellum plantation. Variant bodies were “assigned” to the sideshow by the hegemonic forces of culture: “Once safely contained on the sideshow platform, freaks ignite controversy when appearing in other venues, threatening to contaminate more respectable institutions with the stain of sensationalism and excess” (Adams 17). However, given the dearth of disabled representation on television and considering the latest census indicates almost one-fifth of Americans are disabled, some would argue any exposure is a positive development. Nonetheless, other groups, such as African Americans, would probably recognize the double-edged sword of being ignored yet welcomed in through the back door of hegemonic media representation to be cast in roles the white majority

deemed comfortable and appropriate (e.g. as criminals). We should not forget that despite the polysemous nature of images (Barthes 37), dominant readings mean representations have serious consequences, even in the context of a sideshow: “[F]reak show depictions of Africans as being inherently inferior and animallike, arising as they did from racist attitudes, helped sustain first the institution of slavery and later systematic, unfair, and unequal treatment of non-whites” (Bogdan 197). On the other hand, Janet Davis writes about the dangers of rendering transgressive bodies as mute: “On one level, the circus’s spectacular pageant of the Other—a profusion of people of color working as ‘missing links,’ ‘savages,’ and ‘ape girls’—make [sic] it a popular counterpart to high cultural analyses like Edward Said’s *Orientalism*...,” but, “these approaches run the risk of compounding the stereotype of the Other as mute” (Davis 27).

While the show does allow for voice, it also perpetuates stereotypes that have been in place since about 1840, the year humans took on larger roles in the circus, and P.T. Barnum opened his first museum in New York City (Bogdan 29). Though the show uses visual stereotypes to establish characterization, these stereotypes escape most viewers because the characters stand out as “different” from common peers—paradoxically because of the same effects these stereotypes strove for when they were first encountered. Why does this matter? For one, given the lack of representation of variant bodies in popular media, the danger is that these representations will become what Memmi refers to as the “mark of the plural” (qtd. in Shohat and Stam 183); without a real voice, “Representation thus becomes allegorical; within hegemonic discourse every subaltern performer/role is seen as synechdochically summing up a vast but putatively homogeneous community” (Shohat and Stam 183). The represented group in question has been traditionally oppressed (and some would say particularly so within the context of the sideshow) according to Iris Young’s framework of exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence (38), so much so that their rights had to be institutionally enforced with a series of governmental interventions beginning in the 1970s and culminating in the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (“Historical Context”). Thus, their representation has consequences, especially when considering that the aim of the show, according to the creators, is to establish “The humanity of these people and the things we have in common,” and demonstrate, “[T]he freaks are the normal people, and it’s the normal people who are bizarre” (“Creating the Scene”).

### **Historical Treatment of Freaks Visually Used on the Show**

Examining some of *Carnivàle*’s characters by their situation within historical contexts helps to illustrate the complexity of their representation. Though these characters are indebted to earlier notions of difference, which they are still helping to inscribe, they nonetheless offer more novel concepts to the viewer. This approach, a form of stereotype analysis, is tricky if one wants to avoid being the critic who “forces diverse fictive characters into pre-established categories,” thereby falling into “moralist and essentialist traps” (Shohat and Stam 215). But when the visual representation is purportedly “real” as in the case of *Carnivàle*, the signification bears critique. Though many characters are exquisitely nuanced in deeds, they nonetheless share reified visual presentation modes that are constructed in certain ways by society-at-large.

Robert Bogdan delineates four different varieties of human sideshow exhibitions and two major modes for their presentation, and all are present in *Carnivàle*. The first variety, *Born Freaks*,

consists of the so-called “*lusus naturae*” (i.e., nature’s “jokes” or “mistakes”), people “with real physical anomalies who came by their condition naturally” (6-8). The next category, *Made Freaks*, refers to those people who did something to their bodies to make themselves “unusual enough” (Bogdan 8) for exhibition (e.g., excessive tattooing). The third, *Novelty Freaks*, features people who do not rely on physical variance but on their own developed “unusual performance or ability” (e.g., ingestors and sword swallows) (Bogdan 8). And finally, the fourth category is *Gaffed Freaks*: people who pretended to be *Born Freaks* (e.g., fake conjoined twins).

The four types of freaks, according to Bogdan, are then manifested through two different modes of representation: the aggrandized and the exotic. The “aggrandized mode” hopes to show that, despite the “particular physical, mental, or behavioral condition, the freak is an upstanding, high-status person with talents of a conventional and socially prestigious nature” (Bogdan 108). The attributes within this definition are slanted to the ethos of middle-class white America, hence the use of titles (e.g., Professor, Doctor, Princess). They play up any ties to Europe, flaunting societal memberships or hobbies associated with the upper classes, and in the case of disabled exhibits, demonstrating the performance of day-to-day habits of most people within the middle-class milieu. In contrast to the aggrandized mode of presentation, an exhibit in the exotic mode is presented so as to appeal to people’s interest in “the culturally strange, the primitive, the bestial, the exotic” (Bogdan 105); in other words, anything not associated with middle-class whites in America, such as “cannibalism, human sacrifices, head hunting, polygamy, unusual dress” (Bogdan 105). This interest in the exotic, together with “the rise of complex organizations, changes in science and medicine, exploration of the world, urbanization, the development of the amusement world, the dynamics of supply and demand, changes in technology, and other factors both societal and internal to the institution itself” helped to shape the freak show (Bogdan 267).

These convergences, coupled with the aggrandized and exotic modes of presentation used in the show, further move to solidify privilege to some extent, especially with regard to variant bodies and how they are or are not exploited. The way that *Carnivàle*’s characters are represented—the details, the *mise-en-scène*, etc.—are largely derivative of the sorts of trappings designed by earlier freak shows in response to America’s culture convergences. The grand style of *Carnivàle*, for example, is something from the aggrandized mode: lush tapestries in some trailers and the means of ornamentation recall the embellished style, defined as one “that emphasizes the softening of hard edges with discursive visual techniques to produce a warming and elegant effect” (Dondis 141). The name of the show itself is aggrandized from the word “carnival,” and the names of characters reveal the pro-European slant of the aggrandized mode (e.g., Professor Ernst Lodz).

Looking at some of these characters within this frame, we see Samson portrayed as a *Born Freak* within the aggrandized mode. As in the Season 1 publicity photo, Samson is always dressed resplendently in suit and hat despite the heat and Dust Bowl conditions. He is also never without his cane, a fact emphasized by lingering shots of his gait and conspicuous shots of the lifts on the bottom of his shoes. In a recurring visual trope of the show, he is shown unsteadily climbing the steps of trailers (especially Management’s) and reaching for latches, a way of showing difference that is not used for other “normal people” on the show who have bodily differences (e.g.,

Jonesy's bad leg never gets in the way of his physical work). Similarly, the use of juxtaposition, an old trick of circus displays, embellishes Samson's size. When walking through the carnival during set-up, he often engages in conversation with someone of much taller stature, someone who ends up walking so much faster that Samson ends up shouting to remain in the conversation. Also, the show often portrays his body as lacking power when the camera adopts the POV of average-sized people, particularly that of Ben and Justin, but never adopts Samson's viewpoint.

Though the previous paragraph would seem to indicate the medical model-based logic that the small are literally and thus figuratively weak, Samson is actually very powerful within the structure of the carnival. He is second in command, and in the episode "Pick a Number," we see an old *carta vista* of his that shows him young and powerful in his act as a strongman. However, his power as an older man is largely ceremonial, in that Samson acts on Management's orders despite rarely understanding what he is telling the carnival and its performers to do. Further, when Samson carries something the camera notes him struggling, and despite Samson's protestations, one of the able-bodied people, usually Jonesy, has to jump in and "rescue him;" the overall message is that Samson's frailty is not so much the result of old age but of natal origin. When Samson is portrayed doing something culturally "strong" of his own accord, such as when he shoots Stangler in "Pick a Number" (Season 1, Episode 6), the juxtaposition is equally unsettling to viewers as to characters in the show. Further, Samson develops as the series progresses and becomes more attuned to Management's plan. Even though his power is limited to that of speech and gesture while others do the physical work, he is able to mastermind the meeting between Ben and Brother Justin in the final episode, "New Canaan."

Another *Born Freak* shown in the aggrandized mode is Sabina the Scorpion Woman. Portrayed by Bree Walker, the character gets her name from her ectrodactylous hands, of which viewers are constantly reminded since the camera repeatedly focuses on them. Unlike the show's other *Born Freaks* such as the conjoined twins and the lizard man, Bree Walker came by her depiction naturally. Despite claims the show was filmed as '30s movies were by relying on expansive, wide-angle shots of vistas and emphasizing "big, master shots" ("*Carnivàle*/Television Festival"), the portrayal of Sabina shows a preference for close-ups focused solely on her differently formed hands that further re-inscribe the medical model. This occurs from the first time we encounter her in "On the Road to Damascus" and continues during her appearances through the final episode. In the first encounter with Sabina and in direct correlation with Bogdan's argument that the aggrandized mode exists to show that the freak is capable of "doing tasks that one might assume could not be done by a person with a particular disability" (109), the camera lingers on her hands as she smokes a cigarette. When she is not smoking, the camera features her hands in other ways, often viewed from the side as they are silhouetted against solid backgrounds, such as during her "business handshake" scene with Samson. The camera even pauses on her hand for a few seconds as she extends it, further objectifying her difference for the audience. The ways in which she is made to stand out as a bona fide draw are even manifest in her clothing. In "Creating the Scene," the costume department talks of how they wanted Sabina's dress to further draw attention to her so they researched scorpions to find clothing ideas, chose a dress that looked as if it were made of scales to play up the arachnid aspect of her character, and then dyed the dress bright red-orange.

The revelation that Samson and Sabina used to be married further cements the marginalized status of the *Born Freaks* as compared with regular society people (and the common-bodied sideshow people). (Note: The marrying of “attractions” was also a common publicity stunt perfected by Barnum.) Although Sabina is now married to a common-bodied *Gaffed Freak*—Bert/Bertha—Samson is depicted as a loner who seems incapable of amorous love. He is never alone with a woman in a sexual way, which further underscores the divisions between “freak” love and “regular” love and who is available to whom. The camera plays up Samson’s interactions in a joking way, picking up facial tics and such that hint at a clown-like romance that doesn’t exist with “normal” couples.

Finally, the “freakiest of the freaks” is Gecko, a lizard man portrayed by John Fleck. He has brown, flecked skin and a tail the camera lingers on in the first episode, “Milfay.” Perhaps not coincidentally, Gecko, the freak who looks least human and wears diapers, is also the one who is portrayed as the most sexually “different.” He, as he makes clear in his lisped voice, has extreme sexual urges for both men and women. Coupled with his appearance, these urges, especially for members of the same sex, seem to be expressed to make him appear more deviant than other sexually adventurous characters such as Lila and Libby.

In another category of representation, the *Made Freak*, Ruthie the snake charmer portrays one of the rare instances of the exotic mode used on the show. Played by Adrienne Barbeau, Ruthie performs in front of a backdrop featuring the pyramids and the Sphinx, and she wears sheer harem pants and “Middle Eastern” bracelets and jewelry. Her musical accompaniment incorporates Arabic beats in order to stand apart from the jazz used by other “white” acts; this recalls the idea of “point-of-hearing” as identified by Michel Chion which “is crucial for spectatorial identification” (Shohat and Stam 209). In this case, the music is used to further exoticize her character and embellish the erotic connotations of a foreign culture. In contrast to the medical model that plays up the differences between variant and “normal” bodies, the camera focuses more on her healthy body as it is displayed for the male circus audience than it does on her face. We see repeated shots from all angles of snakes writhing on her body, and despite the emphasis on her body, Ruthie believes, as some of the audience may as well, that the attraction has to do with the visuals of snakes: “Something about a woman handling a snake makes men downright percolated” (episode 7, “The River”).

Another thread of the show that plays out differently depending upon the body in question is that of supernatural power. The rousties (the non-freaks), the most powerful category of bodily portrayal, possess no supernatural power. Many of the freaks, however, whose bodies are portrayed as physically weak, possess supernatural powers of the mental sort. Professor Lodz (Patrick Bachau), for example, is rather frail and blind, but can see by laying his hands upon an object or a person. However, the most powerful people in *Carnivàle* are the avatars of good and evil, all of whom happen to be common-bodied people, a power connection the show seems to imply is linked to the body. The only exception to this is Management/Lucius Belyakov, who had a common body before a WWI misadventure cost him his arms and legs; he bears a striking similarity to armless/legless wonder Nikolai Kobelkoff, the “Human Trunk” (Drimmer 98-99). Belyakov, who is usually seen in extended freeze frames of a flashback as a soldier with bloody stumps wriggling in pain, bought the circus to “blend in” and performs such feats as restoring Lodz’s sight.

Other examples of common bodies retaining power include Brother Justin's hulking apostle Varlyn Stroud (John Carroll Lynch) as a feared and powerful oppressor of the weak and disabled, and Jonesy (Tim DeKay) as an ex-baseball player with a bum leg who leads the rousties. Jonesy attests to the fact that a jock is more powerful than regular people even when damaged, as he rules the rousties with an iron fist and plays the role of circus protector. When he is finally "broken" by being tarred and feathered, he is nonetheless brought back from the verge of death by able-bodied Ben, and even his leg is good as new again. Although the camera frequently features his scrawny frame, images of Ben become increasingly more flattering as his mental and physical gifts increase. That is something that never occurs for the freaks. This culminates in the final confrontation in the cornfield when Ben is stabbed—the lingering overhead shot of him being carried out of the cornfield fixes him in a cruciform shot, playing up his Christ-like goodness and his now-strong looking body in rigid repose as he fights off death. Similarly, Brother Justin is the most powerful both in terms of magical ability and physique. He is often shot from below, especially when preaching fiery sermons, which helps to further embellish his power and physicality. Ben and Brother Justin even have direct physical powers. While Ben lays his hands on to heal, Justin lays his on to show sin. Though some of the freaks have mental powers (such as Appolonia), theirs are not nearly as strong in comparison and thereby it is hard not to tie these powers to the body.

In the end, when healthy bodies are foregrounded—as in rousties pounding stakes—they are often represented in wider shots where they form an intimate part of a usually natural background. The variant bodies, however, are often framed in artificial settings such as trailers, tents, or painted backdrops. Their close-ups serve to accentuate their freakishness, a pattern established in the first episode, "Milfay," when we see the freaks through the eyes of the healthy Ben Hawkins. Examining the performers during the day in their normal lives and at night during their performances, Ben takes in such details as the flesh band connecting the conjoined twins, the ample flesh displayed in the cootch show, and Ruthie's salacious dancing. So, despite the magic and the nuanced nature of the characters, the representations of freaks do not even fall into the so-called "simulcral meliorism" of Shohat and Stam (198)—their presentations are still historical and situated, keeping them for the most part at the sideshow instead of in the center.

### **Race and Ethnicity**

The only African American character who gets a name is Charley Lewis (and, perhaps fittingly, I am unable to locate the actor's name on the official HBO site), a man who is depicted with chunks of grass stuffed around his shoulder, a fat necklace of straw with what appears to be bones hanging from it, and a headdress made of furs and feathers. It is important to note that contemporaneous to the show's setting, in 1933-1934, a "Darkest Africa" exhibit was held at the Century of Progress World's Fair in Chicago. The exhibit consisted of men in g-strings and women in grass skirts who were naked above the waist. The "natives" were mostly recruited from pool halls in Chicago and stood outside all day, led by a "chief" who shouted nonsense words (Bogdan 196). Interestingly, the racist representations of these people also mirror the depiction of Charley Lewis. The people in the World's Fair wore/used "ostrich plumes, leopard sarongs, clubs, spears, zebra hide shields, nose bones and matching accessories" (Bogdan 196). Similarly, Charley Lewis is shown in his first scene walking the dusty road barefoot, and is

further exoticized by juxtaposition with an elephant. He is leading a group of sideshow performers from another carnival, further attesting to his status as a chief of some sort. To some degree, Charley Lewis's portrayal is acting to re-inscribe the ideas associated with the characters on which he is based: "[T]he circus helped consolidate a shared sense of white racial privilege among its diverse, white ethnic audiences; Euroamerican spectators came, in part, to laugh at what they ostensibly were not: pre-industrial, slow, bumbling, naïve, or 'savage'" (Davis 26).

Later on, Lewis loses his exotic adornments but is still the "Other." When the two different shows unite for the evening, although Samson had previously encountered Charley and briefly talked to him when they first saw each other, it is noticeable that Charley is ignored by everyone, with the exception of Lila, the bearded lady. Portrayed as a lascivious southern belle, she dances provocatively with Charley, and after he inquires how long she has had a beard, tells him: "Come back to my room, dark and handsome, and I'll show you something else I had since I was thirteen." Once again the racial/physical "outcasts" are united as love interests. It is also interesting to note that while laws against miscegenation existed during this period, there were no laws barring African Americans from attending the circus, and yet no African Americans are seen as carnival spectators. Some of the discussion threads on the Baer/Lewis race issue suggest there were no blacks on the series because of segregation, but the setting is often in non-Jim Crow states such as New Mexico, California, and even Nebraska where there were actually laws in place barring segregation in amusement places such as circuses ("Jim Crow Laws").

In a sense, the show puts Charley Lewis (and the burden of racial representation he shares with the stereotypical Mexicans and Asians) forth as a castoff. He is window dressing that further serves to background the issue of racial and ethnic struggle. Anne Ducille sees this as the wrong way to go about it: "We need to theorize race and gender not as *meaningless* but as *meaningful*—as sites of difference, filled with constructed meanings that are in need of constant decoding and interrogation." She argues that this approach is still no panacea, but doing so may enable us to "reclaim difference from the moulds of mass production and the casts of dominant culture" (346). By including one token character of what was a large part of sideshows but refusing to deal with him, the show acts more or less like the modern sideshow: "[R]acial freaks are taboo on the programs of contemporary freak shows such as the Jim Rose Circus, [and] the Bindlestiff Family Cirkus, ..." (Adams 12). Those sideshows, however, are touring contemporary America, not existing on a television show set in a bygone era. As Adams points out, the new freak shows actively "seek to redress the nativism, racism, and sexism that fueled sideshows in the past," but "its resurrection relies on a certain degree of forgetting" (20).

This paper has documented aspects of the rather slavish adherence to historical detail in the show, but the one area where the show strongly diverts from historicism is racial diversity. The HBO website, for example, includes an "official" cast picture featuring 18 of the major players from the large cast, and all are white ("Cast and Crew"). A read-through for the Season 1 finale shows approximately 40 actors reading the script, and all are white ("Making 'Carnivàle'"). When select cast members were interviewed at the Museum of Television and Radio's William S. Paley Television Festival, all were white—and none were *Born Freaks* ("Carnivàle/Television"). Similarly, interviews with the costume department indicate that they outfitted over 5,000 people for the first season, and with the exception of a few Asians who run a brothel/gambling hall and Spanish extras in the New Mexico settings, everyone is white and



unnamed with the exception of one Latina dancer and one African-American character who breeze through two episodes. This is a staggering lack of diversity, especially considering its statistical relationship to network television which is considered backward in this area: A study of 679 regular characters on the main networks' 95 scripted shows slated for 2006-2007 indicated white representation was "only" 75% ("Diversity"); *Carnivàle*, including extras, is probably closer to 99% white.

Not only does this lack of representation not gibe with current media, it doesn't gibe with the historical settings *Carnivàle* seeks to emulate. Minorities, though not often represented in a positive way, were nonetheless omnipresent in the circus setting: "At a typical Ringling Bros. show, performers heralded from twenty-two countries. The railroad circus represented a 'human menagerie' of racial diversity" (Davis 10). Of course, given the racial climate of the times, most blacks were not seen in what could be considered "positive" representations, but rather representations in the exotic mode which reinforced racist white notions of "savage Africans" and the like. One example of the perversity of the racist view during this era is that even white *born freaks* were often said to be black, such as native-born white Americans with microcephaly portrayed as "albinos from a head-binding tribe in Africa" (Davis 112).

So does the lack of representation on *Carnivàle* indicate racial progress in that the creators recognized the incendiary potential of sticking to the historical script of representation, or does it show regression by attempting to erase the racism of past white hegemony and obscuring the true picture? *Carnivàle* actually ends up doing both by only including one African American character who only appears in passing. Is the show inherently racist, at least in the sense of how Omi and Winant define racist as something that "creates or reproduces structures of domination based on essentialist categories" (131)? So, in a sense, by not utilizing the kinds of sideshow exploitation that worked in the past by linking to cultural practice and dubious scientific writings (Bogdan 106), the show avoids the racist aspects, but there is a big difference between racial awareness and racial essentialism (Omi and Winant 131-132). What of whitewashing history to avoid the stains of negative minority representation and concomitantly applying blame where it actually lies?

Pointedly, as with the discussion of variant bodies and their portrayal, race is not a factor on the show's discussion boards. I joined two of the largest, most active discussion boards to see if I could gain some perspective. One that I chose, "*Carnivàle\_Over\_30*" seemed promising because it was aimed at "fans of a mature mind set [sic]" and included over 400 members. Though including more than 1,000 searchable postings, none contained the word "race" or "diversity" ("*Carnivàle over 30*"). I also checked out the largest chat group, *CarnivàleHBO*, and searched its 33,000 posts; "diversity" and "race" came up 14 times, all in relation to Stumpy's degradation of Joe Louis. In fact, this post seems to sum up attitudes about the show and what the show's fans are attuned to:

I realized that I didn't remember ever seeing any African Americans on the program at all (myself being an African American). I am surprised at myself I guess because I just found the show so interesting, it never crossed my mind until Stumpy made his racist remarks. (Walton)

Interestingly, the lead writer and creator of the show, Daniel Knauf, posts on this forum as well, and in his 160 archived posts he did not weigh in on the race issue or anything related to it. The lack of diversity in the show is even more puzzling given that race was a huge factor in the opening credits, with allusions to Jesse Owens winning in Berlin and a long shot fixing on a figure from the Ku Klux Klan.

The historical consultant to the show, in an interview, explained that “it’s not a history show,” but then went on to explain that to lend accuracy to the show she made sure to include F.D.R. photos all over the place. Their musical choices, the use of slang, and the modification of behavior also reflect an interest in historical accuracy (Corey). In the end, she feels she achieved her goal: “[I]n terms of what the carnival was like, and what their lives were like, and what they wore, and what they ate, and how they slept, and their cars and all the material culture, it’s impeccable” (Corey). Though the “what” and the “how” may have been impeccably addressed, the “who” still lacks. If the consultant is right, then the show posits the carnival as a place of white performance for white audiences. What is at stake for the public at large when historical accuracy is mediated by the present?

### **Gender on *Carnivàle***

Perhaps the lack of African Americans and other minorities on the show is related to the representation of women on the show. Rather than face up to a racist past, the lack of diversity could perpetuate a racist present by preventing minorities from gazing upon the exposed flesh of the show’s white female characters. Much of the show’s nudity surrounds the strip-show/cooch dancers, a family of three that includes mother Rita Mae (played by Cynthia Ettinger) and her two daughters, Libby (Carla Gallo) and Dora Mae (Amanda Aday). The sexualized nature of their representation includes not only stripping and dancing for rubes and then doing a “blow-off” that involves below-the-waist nudity and splits, but also their post-show “availability” through their spieler/pimp Stumpy, who also happens to be their father/husband (played by Toby Huss). Despite the fact that the women would be considered “low class” outside the carnival, the cooch dancers nonetheless use the aggrandized mode of presentation—performing in front of the banner of “The Gay Paree Show,” with its Eiffel Tower backdrop recalling the idea of Europe as high culture.

Here again, the representations of gender in *Carnivàle* are signified as groundbreaking by many observers:

Here's hoping that “*Carnivàle*” shows a few people out there in Hollywoodland ... that NORMAL-sized women can be and are sexy—and beauty doesn't just stop at the door of the Lane Bryant store! It’s already interesting to see how this show has broken many stereotypes about what is and isn't "commercial" on television. I'm especially glad to see that the old saws about "too fat" and "too old" seem to have been thrown out the window, along with "not gorgeous enough" and "not well-known enough.” (Blighton)

However, it is important to note that while Rita Mae and Dora Mae may embody a larger body type, Libby fits the more current contemporary stereotype of skinny=beautiful, as does the

Mexican stripper who replaces Dora Mae after she is murdered (early in Season 1). The camera lingers on their skinny bodies for just as long, if not longer, than it does on the others.

Part of the subtext is the proper representation of sexuality. Sofie (a tarot reader played by Clea Duvall) and Libby are boyish, waify figures who nearly embark on a lesbian affair, while the ample flesh of Rita Sue and Dora Mae is represented as more natural and hetero-oriented, even to the point that Dora Mae snidely compares her ample bosom to Libby's and crows, "Mama said my titties were a gift from God." Also, while wide shots show their bodies dancing for leering men, the close-ups of their faces reveal Libby's boredom and indifference while the fleshier dancers appear flirtatious and so sexual that they can barely control themselves. This recalls Susan Bordo, who writes, "if the thin body represents a triumph over need and want, a stripping down to some clear, distinct, essence of the self, fat represents just the opposite—the shame of being too present, too hungry, too needy, overflowing with unsightly desire, or simply 'too much'" (462).

The overflowing voraciousness of sexual appetite especially ties to Rita Sue, going so far as to steal the thunder from Catarina de la Rosa. When the latter steals the gaze of the rubes, Rita Mae goes into the crowd, dumps cold water down her white dress, and gives out sponges so the men can wipe her off. Her insatiability is also suggested when, in addition to pleasing "customers" after the show and having marital relations with Stumpy, she is so desirous that she has an affair with Jonesy. Similarly, Lila is portrayed as predatorily sexual, though she is appealing only to "others" like Lodz and Charley Lewis. When she flirts with "normal men" such as Jonesy or Ben, she is ignored. The camera takes pains to tightly focus on her face, usually when she is making a salacious remark, in order to juxtapose her beard with the sexual nature behind her actions, such as when she tells Ben, "I thought I might be the one to pick that cherry."

The many love scenes also highlight instances of bodily displays. Though many sexual dalliances occur on the show, the "normal" bodies of couples like Ben/Sophie are portrayed in a slow, romantic, non-nude way (at least when it comes to "naughty bits"), while differently-bodied love further accents the bodies and their unusual attributes instead of the intellectual repercussions of the act. For example, when Professor Lodz performs cunnilingus on Lila, the camera fills with her face and beard in rapture. Similarly, the Rita Sue/Jonesy affair is represented as an animalistic explosion of lust that culminates in slow-moving close ups and creamy lighting that show Rita Sue kissing and caressing Jonesy's mark of otherness (a twisted, swollen, scarred kneecap) and Jonesy slowly feeling every one of Rita Sue's ample curves as the lighting shows hands probing among the flesh. In the end, the *mise-en-scène* suggests that standard bodies enjoy more stable relationships and more discrete couplings; as Bordo writes, what is problematic is not bodies themselves, but what "those bodies express" (459), and in the case of *Carnivàle*, the large woman is deemed voracious to the point that she is incapable of tender love for partner or family member alike.

## Conclusion

While HBO basks in the glow of critical acclaim (and the industry's perceptions of its prowess) as it produces unique television shows of cinematic-quality, it may do even better to consider issues of representation before it spends millions of dollars on future shows. As the American

nation—a nation where entertainment reigns supreme—still struggles to come to terms with a difficult past and make progress in what may be a difficult future, the moving image has some sway in how the past and the future are interpreted and thus realized. *Carnivàle* is a fascinating, entertaining, coarse look at a magical yet real world, but those watching should also heed the following as they look upon the present: “The ongoing social and legal struggles of people with disabilities and racial minorities attest to the fact that, although they are no longer exhibited as freaks, the realities of appearance-based discrimination persist in American culture” (Adams 20).

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