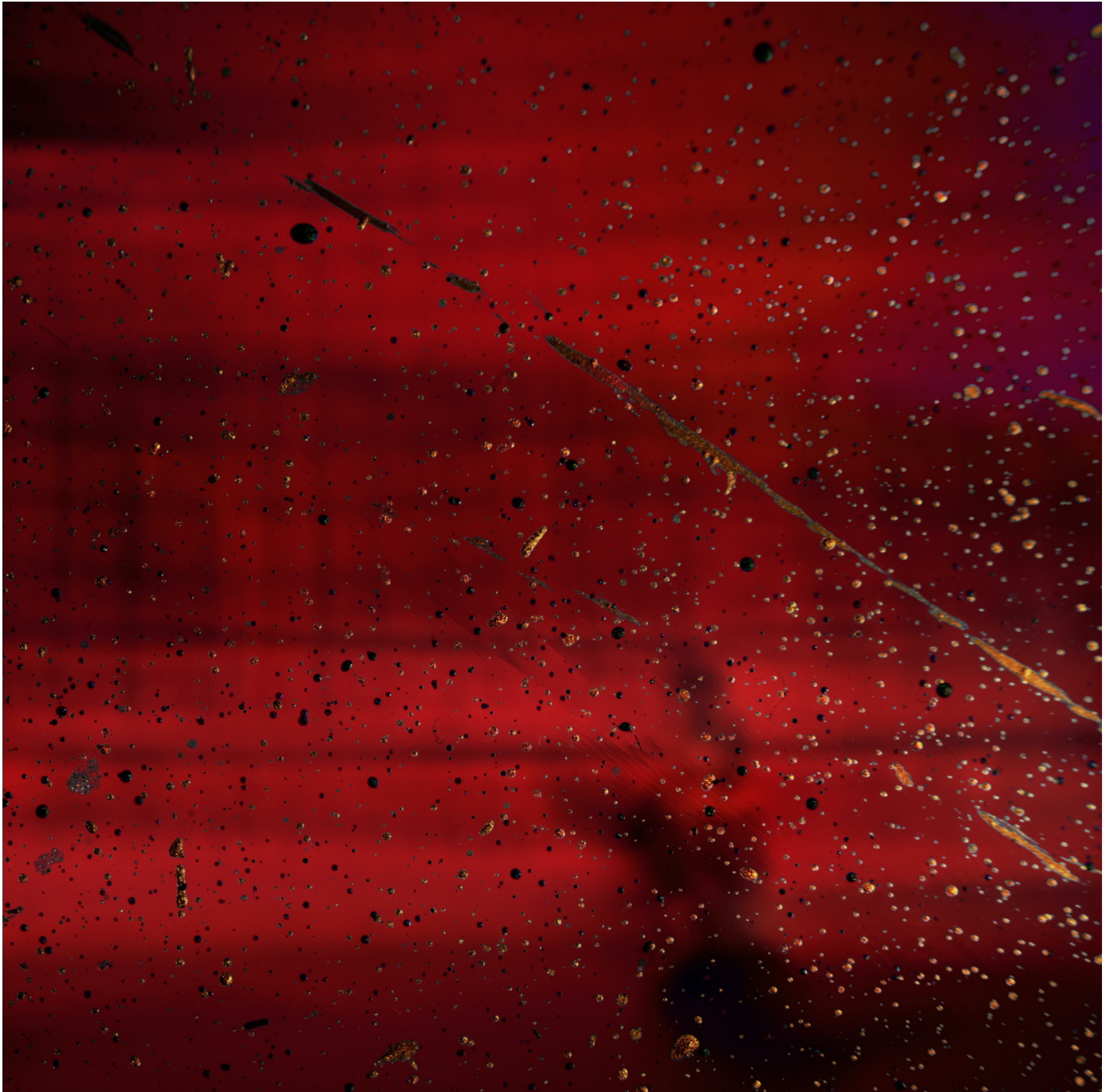




# RELIGION & CULTURE

*2021      Volume 29*





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We would also like to offer our special thanks to:  
Dr. Carly Daniel-Hughes, our very supportive Department Chair,  
Dr. Hillary Kaell for all her help and guidance in planning Dr.  
Sarah Imhoff's visit to Concordia in September 2019,  
Tina Montandon and Munit Merid, administrators  
extraordinaire, and all our referees, readers, and everyone else  
who offered their help in the publication of this edition of the  
journal.

*A Peer-Reviewed Academic Journal*  
2021 Volume 29

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The Journal of Religion and Culture (JRC) is proudly produced by the Graduate Students of the Department of Religions and Cultures at Concordia University.

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Concordia University, Montreal, Quebec.

ISSN 1198-6395  
Journal of Religion and Culture Volume 29 (2021)

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JRC logo design: Christopher Burkart  
Book Design: T. Scarlet Jory  
The font used for this journal is Century Schoolbook.  
Affinity Publisher was used to design the layout of this journal.

Cover photo by Jr Korpa on Unsplash

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# ***Canadian Carnival Freaks and the Extraordinary Body, 1900-1970s***

Jane Nicholas. University of Toronto Press, 2018. 320 pages. \$23.96 (paperback).

In *Canadian Carnival Freaks*, Jane Nicholas offers a detailed examination of the little-studied history of Canadian carnival freak shows, their place in Canadian popular culture, and in particular, the intersections of race, ability, and class as determining factors in the recruiting and marketing of sideshow acts. The study is situated within the broader tradition of disability scholarship and the sub-field of carnival studies in particular. The theoretical and methodological underpinnings of *Canadian Carnival Freaks* depend largely on the work of American disability studies scholars Robert Bogdan and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, their emphasis on the social and cultural history of disability, and the construction of what Garland-Thomson calls “the extraordinary body” (Nicholas 14). Scholars working within that tradition will find that Nicholas's contributions help close a gap in the social history of the freak show, by bringing into focus the roles of Canadian performers, showmen, and communities in North American carnival history.

Nicholas's work could easily be divided into two distinct sections, though Nicholas herself does not structure the book this way. The first three chapters focus on the history and background of the shows and their operators, as well as the relationship between carnival operators and local and federal governments (American and Canadian). These chapters set the stage for the latter half of the book, which takes a more targeted view. In the last three chapters, Nicholas narrows her focus,

examining the case histories of particular performers, as well as the history of the development of the “normal” body, twentieth-century constructions of childhood and cuteness, and the implications of class, age, race, and ability in defining categories of “normal,” “beautiful,” “ugly,” “desireable,” and what counts as the productive.

In chapters 1 to 3, Nicholas presents a detailed account of Canadian carnival history through an examination of archival material (photos, newspaper articles, advertisements, and interviews). Though Nicholas gestures to potential gaps in her analysis due to the scarcity of archival material in some regions, and in terms of first-person accounts by performers versus operators and managers (18-19), the overall result of Nicholas's analysis reads as a comprehensive and precise consideration of her material. Her focus, due to these limitations, centres on the provincial contexts of Ontario and Quebec, though she does also provide insight into the western Canadian context. Especially insightful in these opening sections is Nicholas's re-situating of the carnival as a central part of Canadian consumer and popular culture. Rather than banishing the carnival to the margins, Nicholas suggests that carnival operators, such as Patty Conklin (a particular focus of Nicholas, and a giant in the Canadian carnival business), responded to public and government concerns over the tastefulness of carnival sideshows by aligning their promotional strategies with broader social developments in Canadian culture. Specifically, the medicalization of disabled and racialized bodies, as well the development of pediatrics, influenced the way carnival freak show performers were marketed to their Canadian and American audiences. Through a clever reframing of freak shows and sideshows as educational and as medically curious, Conklin and other operators were able to convince reluctant town governments to grant them operating licences (127). In a similar vein, the casting of carnival operators and

employees as members of extended carnival families, allowed freak shows to ally themselves with a broader societal interest in “the family” as a productive ideal (96-97).

While Nicholas's first three chapters are rigorous in their scholarship and provide an enlightening and necessary context to the background of Canadian carnival shows, it is her analysis of the carnival's relationship to childhood, and specifically to child freak show performers, in the second half of the book that elevates the volume. Nicholas is quick to note in her chapter, “Not Just Child's Play: Child Freak Show Consumers and Workers,” that much of what historians can access about children's lives in carnival shows is limited. Like many carnival freak show performers, child performers did not control the often manufactured narratives that were created around them (151). This chapter in particular is therefore a patchwork of what information is available, alongside a discussion of the construction of childhood from the 1920s to the 1960s in Canada. Divided into sections concerning child audiences, and others concerning child performers, Nicholas uses the case study of freak show performer Ernie Defort and the Dionne quintuplets to highlight the complex interrelationships between poverty, access to medical treatment, racialization, and recruitment into carnival freakshows (166-171, 190-199). This analysis flows easily into Nicholas's discussion in chapter 6 of the construction of “cuteness,” particularly in relation to children and to dwarf performers. In the case of the latter, Nicholas describes how elaborate narratives were often constructed around dwarf performers, who were presented in carnival sideshows as miniature versions of idealized heterosexual family units. The creation of these kinds of narratives “was especially important to the 'cleaning up' of freak shows” (179). Notably, these performers tended to be white, and while the freak show afforded them a positive valence not often felt by other

freak show performers, respectability in the context of the shows did not translate into acceptance outside the context of performing (180-181).

The attentiveness and care with which Nicholas approaches her subject deserves comment. The case studies of Defort and the Dionne quintuplets are told skillfully, without slipping into exploitation or sensationalization, and Nicholas is careful to note that her choice to use limited photographic material in the book is due in part to her desire not to replicate the exploitation of freak show performers (20). That said, the first half of Nicholas's monograph does suffer from minor organizational issues. Although Nicholas's first few chapters use a more historiographical approach, she often jumps back and forward in time, so that figures and historical developments can be hard to keep track of in what is a detailed and complex account. These chapters may therefore prove challenging or less accessible to the layperson or to undergraduate students. That said, Nicholas's last three chapters would be a happy addition to an undergraduate or graduate syllabus focusing on attitudes toward the body in Canada, as well as the history of childhood and spectacle in North America.

*Reviewed by: Elliot Mason (Concordia University)*



