

QUALIA'S QUALMS



Why I describe myself as a historian of 'displayed peoples', not 'human zoos'

27/09/2016 by Qualia's Qualms | [Leave a comment](#)

My first book *Peoples on Parade* was published five years ago this month. I will never forget the day that the first copies were delivered. After so many years, having my book in my hands left me utterly overwhelmed. I spent a long time leafing through every page as I absorbed the book's beautiful reality. That moment has been on my mind this summer as I've spent most of it writing essays that I expect will be my last on displayed peoples for a while.

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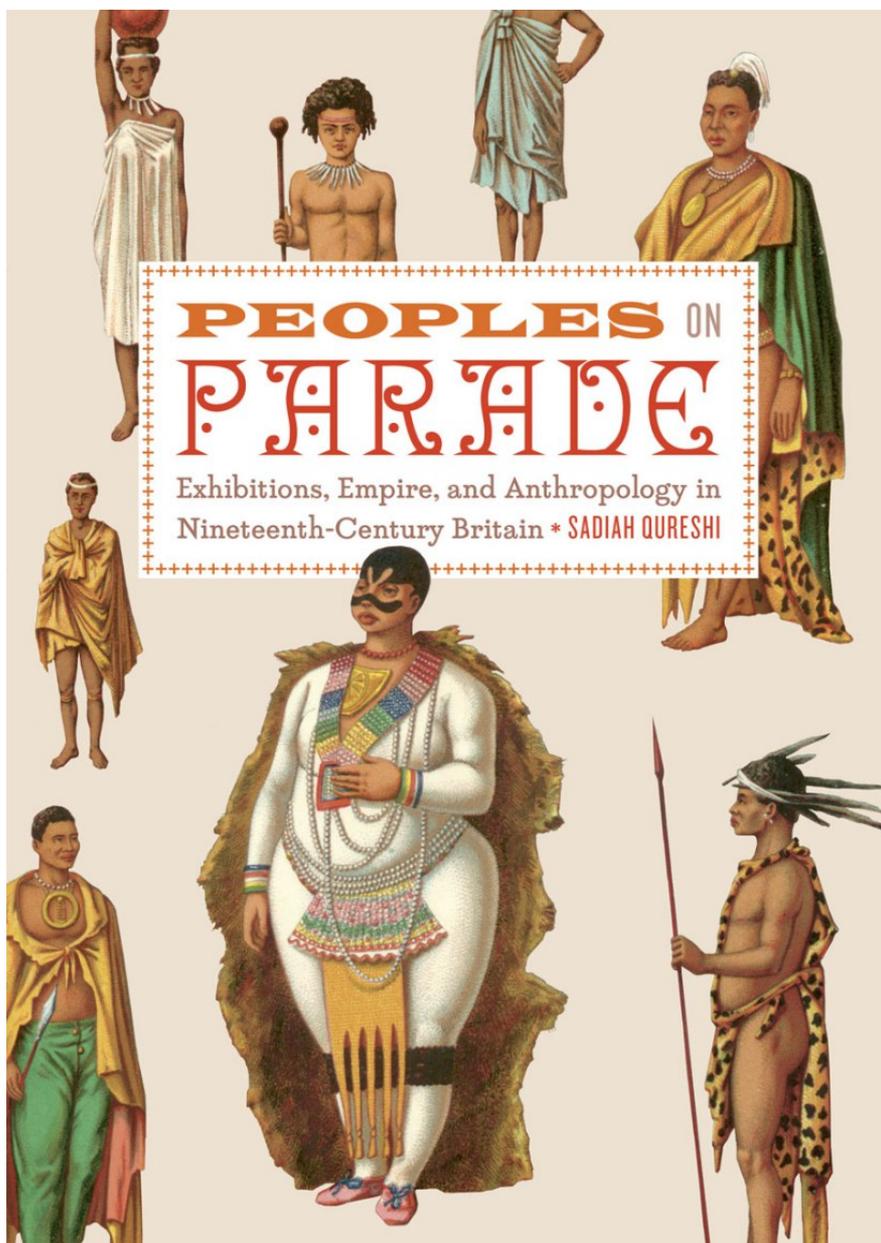
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One of the strangest things about writing a book is the experience of being reviewed and seeing my work on reading lists. I'm immensely pleased with the [reviews](#) that I've received and excited by how many people use my work to explore the history of race, science and empire with their students. Reading reviews and seeing my work cited makes me I wish I'd been more explicit about describing myself as a historian of 'displayed peoples'.

Peoples on Parade traced how foreign peoples were displayed in galleries, theatres, museums, and private rooms. For a shilling or more, the public could meet groups of Sámi, South Americans,

Inuit, Native Americans, Africans, Arabs, Pacific Islanders, Australian Aborigines, Indians, Japanese, Chinese, and 'Aztecs' performing songs, dances and cultural rites. I focused on nineteenth-century London but such shows were common across Europe and America and continued into the twentieth century.

Many writers describe these shows as 'human zoos' in both specialist academic histories, [art installations](#) and broader public discussion. I can see why. The term is catchy, evocative and seems to encapsulate the degrading ways in which many performers were treated. Even so, I think the term is deeply misleading and one I deliberately avoid.

Firstly, visitors to the shows came away with complex and multiple interpretations of their experiences. Some were deeply negative about the performers in deeply racist and culturally chauvinist terms. Many others came away with an abiding impression of the common humanity between themselves and performers. These reviewers frequently noted their observations on performers' quick wits, skills and maternal instincts. Crucially, these commentators were not promoting racial equality but endorsing hierarchical visions of humanity in which performers were considered to be relatively lowly. These complexities are not captured by insisting that performers were routinely seen as little more than animals.

Secondly, we need to pay attention to performers' agency instead of assuming that they were passive victims of patrons' gazes. Frustratingly, there are few sources from which to reconstruct how performers felt about their experiences. Even so, eyewitness reports, newspaper reviews and scientific reports abound with revealing details. For example, [Sara Baartman](#), better known as the 'Hottentot Venus', was exhibited in Europe between 1810 and her death in 1815. Whilst in Paris she was exhibited to the men of science working at the [Jardin des Plantes](#). They asked to view her labia because they were rumoured to be longer than usual in European women. Baartman categorically refused even when offered extra payment. We know about this incident from the irritation expressed by one of the men at the meeting, yet it also makes clear that, even in heavily restricted circumstances,

Baartman found ways to maintain her agency and some measure of dignity. We must not conflate agency with freedom or forget to acknowledge the deeply unequal power relations that usually characterised the shows. Nonetheless, we should also remember that even small [acts of refusal](#) or accommodation can tell us a great deal about performers' experiences.

Finally, the shows were important opportunities for intercultural encounters between peoples. Some of the most powerful stories I found in my research involved performers making a life for themselves abroad. Baartman, for example, was baptised and married whilst being exhibited around England. In 1844, the American entrepreneur George Catlin exhibited a group Native Americans. Their interpreter, [Alexander Cadotte](#), who had Native American ancestry, married [Sarah Haynes](#) after a brief courtship. In 1899, [Peter Lobengula](#) was the headline act for a show called 'Savage South Africa' at Earls Court. He attracted enormous press attention for being engaged to a white woman nicknamed 'Kitty' Jewell. These relationships are extraordinary examples of the personal associations that could be built by performers outside of the shows. It is far too easy to overlook these complexities if we assume visitors saw displayed peoples as performing beasts.

'Human zoos' is so suggestive that many historians will continue to use the term. I will always prefer 'displayed peoples'.

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