

SUSAN M. SCHWEIK, *The Ugly Laws: Disability in Public* (New York: New York UP, 2009), 429 pp.

In this fundamental text, Susan Schweik connects discourses within the field of disability studies with an analytic approach to law and its ultimate consequences. The exhibition of disabled bodies in freakshows has been discussed extensively in the last decades, particularly in the United States.<sup>1</sup> At the heart of these discussions is the tension between exploitation, economic need, and celebrity status, as the shows contributed to nineteenth-century discourses of national identity and body politics. Writing about the same time and geographical location, the protagonist of Schweik's text is the "unsightly beggar" (2), who is banned from the streets of American cities due to his/her body being visually disturbing. This display of bodies differs from the freakshow, since it is obviously less connected to the entertainment industry and its glamour and fame. However, the body politics and discourses of national identity are comparable, if not the same.

The first part of the book is concerned with the emergence of the ugly laws that eventually allow a persecution of disabled people begging in public space. Schweik departs from newspaper announcements and laws issued in San Francisco, Chicago, and New Orleans—three cities that continue to be her main examples next to New York City. She historically contextualizes these cities and looks at the structure and planning involved to place the unsightly beggar within the city landscape, finding that musicians were at a particular risk of being persecuted. Urban space develops in particular ways during the nineteenth century, mapping cities as structured categories of human lives.

As early as her second chapter, Schweik includes the Charity Organization Society and the idea of pity in her analysis to question the dynamics of the law and the involvement of charity within it. Thus, she can relate the idea of biopower as conceived by Michel Foucault to several institutions and to a general map-

ping and planning of the city these institutions are ultimately part of. Schweik includes and discusses alternative city concepts, such as Ebenezer Howard's map for a "Slumless, Smokeless Garden City" (74)—which is indeed a map—and narratives that challenge the concept of the city as such.

As a scholar of literature, Schweik carefully observes the language of the issued laws and reveals its grotesque logic and medical reference while the wording is at the same time extremely vague and open to interpretation. She also shows the dynamics of that language that is not only isolated in the law—an inevitably closed text—but also springs from and feeds into a public discourse about the body. Inevitably, the laws do not only affect the city landscape as such but also significantly influence immigration rules and concepts of work and employment and thus turn out to be concerned with class and poverty.

The originality of the book really lies in the great richness and variety of the material Schweik uses and connects smoothly. Various newspaper articles, laws (and drafts of laws), public responses, cartoons, maps, and images are part of her investigation—material that in its majority is analyzed and published for the very first time. As a literary scholar, one of her focuses is literature produced and sold on the street by disabled people. The chapter "All about ugly laws (for ten cents)," which is also the concluding chapter, is devoted to the analysis of the life and texts of Arthur Franklin Fuller, whose income depended on the mendicant literature he produced. Fuller was born in Chicago in 1880 and pursued a musical career, but continuous suffering from unknown causes prevented him from further work and eventually tied him to a wooden carriage from which he, unable to move, began to write stories, predominantly autobiographical, to sell on the streets. Due to the ugly laws, Fuller was continuously prevented from selling his books and eventually wrote about the experience of discrimination, also critically examining charity organizations and their role in the ugly laws. Fuller was not the only author of such literature; several disabled men shared their fate this way. Their texts positioned their heroes as extremely unfortunate (already marked in titles such as *How I lost my Feet. Written by a Loser* [cf. 259]) and negotiated their bodies as both disabled and normal. By analyzing these texts, Schweik introduces original material that will

<sup>1</sup> See Rosemarie Garland Thomson, ed., *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (New York: New York UP, 1996); and Rachel Adams, *Sideshow U.S.A.: Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination* (University of Chicago Press, 2001).

be valuable beyond her text to scholars of literature looking at autobiography and disability.

*The Ugly Laws* places the issue of the “unsightly beggar” within the dynamics of nineteenth-century capitalism, urban landscapes, physical and mental disability, gender, class, and race. By trying to theorize these bodies, she also discusses the concept of intersectionality, which has been most usefully formulated by Valerie Smith and Diana Courvant’s concept of confluence to establish performed and negotiable identity (cf. 61). It becomes clear that the body (and its aesthetics) are not only

the focus of the ugly laws but also the issue of poverty that a rising middle class tries to avoid. Schweik’s book has already become a standard work in disability studies because it addresses crucial issues such as the body in public space and the connection between law and language. It is a most valuable source for further thinking about disability in connection with law, identity, and history, and it is useful material in the classroom when looking at aspects of American history, immigration, and (popular) literature.

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