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Nineteenth-Century Depictions of Disabilities and Modern Metadata: A Consideration of Material in the P. T. Barnum Digital Collection

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Nineteenth-Century Depictions of Disabilities and Modern Metadata: A Consideration of Material in the P. T. Barnum Digital Collection

Cover Page Footnote

With deep gratitude to my project colleagues Adrienne, Elizabeth, and Susan, as well as to Sara and Ferris for their assistance.

NINETEENTH-CENTURY DEPICTIONS OF DISABILITIES AND MODERN METADATA: A CONSIDERATION OF MATERIAL IN THE P. T. BARNUM DIGITAL COLLECTION

The P. T. Barnum Digital Collection is a collaboration between the Barnum Museum and the Bridgeport Public Library's Bridgeport History Center. The Barnum Museum's holdings are primarily three-dimensional objects but also include archival material, while the Bridgeport History Center's holdings are primarily archival material with a small collection of objects. Combined, the digital collection constitutes 1,282 items with diverse object types that include carriages, cake, furniture, clothing, decorative arts, and paintings, as well as manuscripts, notebooks, photographs, and printed material. The amount of archival material owned by both institutions comes out to be 10 linear feet of manuscript boxes, 21 custom enclosures for books and photograph albums, and 10 oversize drawers containing 338 items. The project, both in its planning and implementation, was funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities and represents five years of work from the initial planning grant proposal in 2012 to the completion of the digital collection in December 2017. The primary goal of the project has been to provide context-heavy descriptions for each and every item, including information about the item's use, owner, and history. The P. T. Barnum Digital Collection is a part of the University of Connecticut's online repository, the Connecticut Digital Archive.

Within the collection is a significant amount of material that involves historical depictions of performers with disabilities and unusual bodies. This is not only thanks to Barnum's late nineteenth-century circuses but also to his earlier American Museum in New York City (1842–68), where he engaged these types of performers. Heavily represented in the P. T. Barnum Digital Collection are Charles S. Stratton, known as "General Tom Thumb"; M. Lavinia Warren; and George Washington Morrison Nutt, all individuals with dwarfism who rose to international fame thanks to their natural skills and Barnum's marketing savvy.¹ As a result, the digital collection team considered the following questions as it created the collection: how should this project balance the historical elements of the collection and the perception of disabilities in that time period against contemporary understanding and discourse, and how should this project address use of language in cases where it is impossible to use subject headings? After all, there is no avoiding the fact that these were people whose very bodies defined them as performers and were the primary factor in their rise to fame. Their legacy is tangled up in the complicated space of what defined entertainment in the past and what comprises identity in the present, and as a result creates significant challenges in making this material accessible to the public in a manner that is respectful and conscious of these nuances.

To find a way forward, the project cataloger conducted an extensive literature review, analyzed the collections of other institutions, and examined the limits in regards to metadata, description, and time in order to develop the project's final standards. Literature consulted included an array of viewpoints from the field of disabilities studies, museum theory, archival theory, contemporary sideshow performers, and living communities, and the collections reviewed include museum, archive, and library holdings. The result is a robust approach that capitalizes on the more museum-like perspective being applied to digital objects, an extremely pointed subject

¹ The contemporary preferred term for those with dwarfism is generally "little people," which is used in this article.

heading selection, and a focus on using the project to illuminate all aspects of a performer's life, going beyond the image presented on a *carte de visite* or published in a booklet sold alongside his or her exhibition.²

Literature Review

Prior to assigning any subject headings, the cataloger planned to review how fellow institutions have handled historical depictions of disability. Still, the cataloger determined that before looking at similar collections to see their approaches, it was first necessary to examine the various contemporary perspectives of disability scholars, disabilities rights activists, archivists and museum professionals with related collections, and contemporary sideshow performers.

The field of disability studies has a number of models for understanding disability that inform the literature and debate within the community. The list is lengthy, comprising around nine frameworks, but two come up the most: the social model and the medical model, with the former predominant.³

Understanding of the social model informs understanding of the medical model and vice versa. The social model, also called the minority group model, “argues from a socio-political viewpoint that disability stems from the failure of society to adjust to meet the needs and aspirations of a disabled minority.”⁴ It states that because the issue falls on society to begin with, society must fix the issue rather than place the burden on the individual or small community that is struggling. This helps to address attitudes on a wide array of topics such as lack of accessibility to events, discrimination, and lack of accommodations in employment, and tries to ensure that all are afforded equal opportunity to participate in society at all levels. The medical model takes an opposing view, focusing on the physical or mental limits of a given individual who has a disability and removing other elements that factor into that person's life. This excludes consideration of such issues as geographic location, access to transportation, and societal attitudes, and focuses only on medical services.⁵ This approach can reinforce the idea that the person in question is lacking in some way and can classify the individual as abnormal. It places the burden of change on the individual rather than society as a whole.

Both of these models are pertinent to the P. T. Barnum Digital Collection. The societal model helps us to look at people who chose to exhibit themselves in a place like Barnum's American Museum or a circus sideshow and understand how those with disabilities were viewed at the time and what barriers they faced in entering society. Likewise, the medical model is key to examining how medical science both fueled interest in these performers and led to their exhibitions falling out of fashion due to increased understanding of genetics, evolution, and medical science.

² *Cartes de visite* are photographs that measure about 2.5 x 4 inches that were popular from the 1860s to the early 1900s. They were typically mounted on stiff cardstock or paper and primarily feature portraits.

³ Amponsah-Bediako, “Relevance of Disability Models,” 122.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 125.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 122.

Many in the field of disability studies also promote the concept of people-first language when discussing and writing about disabilities. The idea is to emphasize people's personhood and not their disabilities. As such, when discussing an individual, one gives his or her name and then an indication of the disability, which can be specific or vague. For example, "The subject of this photograph is Charles S. Stratton, who had dwarfism," names what the disability was, whereas, "Eli W. Sprague, who had a disability, performed for a number of years in various circuses," does not. This language is criticized by some within the larger community who view it as too much political correctness, while others see it as hiding the names of diseases in clever words and contributing to stigma. Vocal critics include the National Federation for the Blind in the United States and autistic communities, which are split over the use; parents whose children have autism often differ from those with autism themselves, the latter preferring to call themselves autistic rather than "a person with autism."⁶ Critics also disapprove of the grammar of people-first language, as it forces long, awkward, clunky sentences.⁷ This particular criticism resonates strongly when it comes to subject headings and metadata, which need to be concise and to the point.

Put into practice, this very need to create concise subject headings has an effect on disability studies researchers. In Amelia Koford's article "How Disability Studies Scholars Interact with Subject Headings," she examines the impact of the Library of Congress's current classification approach to disabilities and how it impacts those in the field. Like humanities scholars, disability studies searches are not directed by Library of Congress subject headings, but unlike humanities scholars, "a few participants suggested that they avoid subject headings partly because the terms used in the headings are not their preferred terms."⁸ The idea that users are not employing subject headings because they are uncomfortable with the Library of Congress's language and other vocabularies to describe disabilities speaks to the inherent problems of cataloging this type of material. There is an ever-changing vocabulary stemming from activism, identity, and shifts in understanding disability.

The challenges of describing disability, as highlighted in Koford's article, are issues in both the museum and archival worlds. A 2005 report titled "Buried in the Footnotes: The Representation of Disabled People in Museum and Gallery Collections" explores a number of topics related to museum collections and disability in the United Kingdom. One of the report's conclusions regards the limited display of relevant material and cites "uncertainty, lack of confidence and fear of criticism" as the primary reasons that many museums do not approach disabilities in their public galleries, along with concern about reinforcing stereotypes and encouraging staring.⁹ The 2010 book *Re-Presenting Disability: Activism and Agency in the Museum*, edited by the same individuals who authored the 2005 report, attempts to provide the guidance that the 2005 report suggests is necessary. Theoretical essays offer solutions, but the work also includes case studies from a number of museum exhibits and events. One covers a project on Joseph Merrick, known as the Elephant Man; another looks at the Museum of Sex's experience in having an exhibit about disability and sexuality that received negative attention from members of the disabilities rights activist community. The book emphasizes insisting that members of the communities who

⁶ Collier, "Person-First Language: Noble Intent," 1978.

⁷ Collier, "Person-First Language: Laudable Cause," E940.

⁸ Koford, "How Disability Studies Scholars Interact," 398, 399.

⁹ Dodd, et al., "Buried in the Footnotes," 15.

have disabilities be involved in creating exhibits in order to tell their own stories, because the perspective of those with contemporary disabilities helps to encourage the public to rethink its own biases.¹⁰

Amelia Koford writes about this invitation to participate in her article “Engaging an Author in a Critical Reading of Subject Headings.” There, Koford speaks with author Eli Clare about the subject headings assigned to his book, which covers the intersectionality of disability and queer theory. Clare is highly critical and questions a number of the headings, and offers several alternative ones that he believes describe the text more accurately. By doing so, Koford demonstrates two primary advantages of engaging authors in the selection of subject headings, especially authors that belong to one or more minority groups. The first is that by asking them to review or assign subject headings, a work can be more accurately represented. The second is that it ensures the author’s perspective is made clear, especially if the language is highly specialized or contains vocabulary that catalogers would not think to include if they are not a part of a minority group.¹¹

Sara White draws similar considerations and conclusions in her 2012 article “Crippling the Archives: Negotiating on Notions of Disability in Appraisal and Arrangement and Description.” After deconstructing the social model for the oversimplifications it can lead to, White suggests using the lesser known disability model of complex embodiment. A relatively new model proposed by Tobin Siebers, complex embodiment strives to connect the social and medical models in order to create greater nuance. This in turn highlights how one’s diagnosis and social environments impact disability and how individuals think through and process experiences. White also discusses the importance of considering disabilities in the various stages of archiving. She emphasizes the idea of participatory appraisal, that is working with the community or an individual to understand their narrative and select material. She then gives the example of a man who has lost his leg, both as an example of complex embodiment, as there is a before and after element, but also to discuss how to consider disability in the various stages of working through a collection. With her aforementioned example, the participatory aspect allows for the donor or subject to discuss his own perspective on his disability and ensure that he is present in his narrative. This ensures that the donor’s perspective on his disability and how it impacted his life is represented as accurately as possible, in turn preserving the nuance for the future. What also stands out is her review of disability-related material in WorldCat, which, when searched, primarily turns up medical information. This prompts White to ask, “Do archives currently house disability collections that are not described?” She suggests that the reason the answer is “yes” is because both our definition of the concept and our sensibilities have changed.¹²

The emphasis on having people who are part of a given community participate in telling their stories is not something limited to journal articles and books. It is an oft-repeated point whenever the matter of approaching materials related to disabilities occurs. Panels at various conferences have driven this point home, including “Making the Quiet Voices Loud: Oral Histories, the ADA@25, the Deaf Catholic Archive” at the New England Archivists’ spring 2017 meeting and “Building Community: How an Exhibit Opens Doors to a New Community” at the Connecticut

¹⁰ Sandell, Dodd, and Garland-Thompson, eds., *Re-Presenting Disability*, 225.

¹¹ Koford, “Engaging an Author in a Critical Reading,” 1–2.

¹² White, “Crippling the Archives,” 116, 120, 122–23.

League of History Organizations' annual conference on June 5, 2017. Both panels discussed not only the work to document the history of communities with disabilities but also how they built trust and invited individuals with disabilities to work with the panel members as a part of their team. The lesson was the same: to do right by the community, you must involve the community.

For the P. T. Barnum Digital Collection, this type of call to action means reaching out to the little people community, as the vast majority of disabilities-related material is connected to Charles S. Stratton and M. Lavinia Warren, who were little people themselves. At the time of publication, such outreach is still in progress, but discussions with disability scholars have helped refine and clarify key elements of object descriptions and ensure a more accurate representation of the material and the reasons for the material's creation.

The final perspective considered in determining the metadata approach of the P. T. Barnum Digital Collection is the perspective of individuals with disabilities who elect to enter into performance spaces and exhibit themselves. Modern sideshows that feature these performers include the Jim Rose Circus and Sideshows by the Seashore at Coney Island. These individuals feel that because they have chosen to perform rather than have any other job, they should not have others talking over them or sorting them into communities with whom they do not identify. This is directly addressed in Robert Bogdan's seminal text *Freak Show: Presenting Human Bodies for Amusement and Profit*. Here, Bogdan showcases a conversation with the performer Otis Jordan, a man with deformed limbs whose act revolved around demonstrations such as rolling up and enjoying a cigarette by only using his lips to maneuver the tobacco. Bogdan talks to Jordan about a woman who objected to the display of the disabled on the New York State's Fair Midway. Her complaint caused the show to be moved back much farther from the main area; as a result, the show took in considerably less profit, thus impacting the performers. Jordan states that he enjoys the travel opportunities and ability to meet people afforded to him through his line of work. His issue with the entire situation is that the woman who lodged the complaint did not come to talk to him about it personally and instead went over his head. He notes, "How can she say I'm being taken advantage of? Hell, what does she want for me—to be on welfare?" Bogdan summarizes the woman's perspective by suggesting that her actions are an attempt to end the set-apart nature of those with disabilities who were once sequestered in freak shows, incapable of making a living through any other means, and that "to end freak shows is a symbolic struggle closely tied to the very transformation of America that disability activists seek."¹³ The publication of *Freak Show* prompted sideshow performers to discuss their own perspectives when it came to exhibiting themselves. Key topics in the discussions were that of perspective, agency, and decision to make a living through exhibition and performance.

Disability and Existing Archival and Museum Collections

Due to the popularity of photographic *cartes de visite* of performers with whom Barnum worked, contemporary interest in sideshows by collectors and academics, and the place of performers associated with Barnum such as Charles S. Stratton and M. Lavinia Warren in nineteenth-century popular culture, a number of collections have identical or extremely complementary material to the P. T. Barnum Digital Collection. This offers a distinct advantage in examining the cataloging and descriptive practices used by other institutions. Of the collections reviewed, the following

¹³ Bogdan, *Freak Show*, 280–81.

stand out in particular and offer insight into how the various theoretical perspectives discussed above factor into description.

The Ronald G. Becker Collection of Charles Eisenmann Photographs at Syracuse University is similar in scope and content to the Barnum collection and in fact shares some of the same photographs. This collection, which comprises 12 linear feet and whose digital surrogates total 1,413 images, only uses the Library of Congress subject headings. Individual items within the Becker Collection contain their own subject headings but are highly limited in how many are assigned.



Figure 1 (left), *Lavinia Warren, Midget* (0671), and figure 2 (right), *Wild Men of Borneo, Midgets* (0428). Courtesy Ronald G. Becker Collection of Charles Eisenmann Photographs, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Libraries.

Figure 1 is titled *Lavinia Warren, Midget* and only assigns this photograph the subject heading “dwarfism,” offering no further elaboration on who she was or what she accomplished in her lifetime.¹⁴ The title also uses the word “midget,” a term considered unacceptable by the contemporary little people community. This approach to subject headings and description is consistent throughout the collection. Figure 2 is another example. *Wild Men of Borneo, Midgets* is a cabinet card photograph of Hiram and Barney Davis. In addition to using the word “midget” in the title, the brief description given simply reads, “Full view, two bearded and long haired midgets standing with normal sized man between them.” The single assigned subject heading is “dwarfism.” These headings offer only medical diagnosis of the individuals depicted with no acknowledgment of the societal aspects of their careers or insight into their full biographies. Beyond falling into the medical model, this limited form of description is useful if the researcher

¹⁴ Warren was a performer and entertainer who Barnum helped promote. She married fellow Barnum performer Charles S. Stratton (General Tom Thumb), and the couple’s fame was on the scale of contemporary celebrities.

knows the technical terminology for these entertainers, but any other approach to searching the collection is severely limited.

The Disability History Museum and its descriptive data offers another approach. They do not employ the Library of Congress subject headings but instead have their own vocabulary that limits the use of medical language. Their online collection pulls material from various online sources, including the Becker Collection.



Figure 3 (left), *Lavinia and Minnie Warren*, and figure 4 (right), *Wild Men of Borneo*. Courtesy Disability History Museum. Original items held in Ronald G. Becker Collection of Charles Eisenmann Photographs, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Libraries

In examining the subject headings for figure 3, a photograph of M. Lavinia Warren and her sister Minnie, what quickly becomes apparent is the emphasis on moving away from purely medical terminology. In addition to using “short stature” and “physical disability” to indicate why the sisters are a part of the Disability Museum, the museum adds the terms “entertainment,” “family,” and “popular culture,” which help to indicate their status as performers in the 1860s, as well as the fact that they were related. Likewise, Hiram and Barney Davis in figure 4 are given similar descriptions. This image’s headings include “short stature” and use the more medical term “microcephaly” in addition to “circus,” “entertainment,” and “popular culture.”¹⁵ The final result is a form of description that leans toward complex embodiment theory, focusing on the presentation of these performers and their jobs rather than on their bodies.

In contrast to the two collections discussed above, the Museum of disABILITY History provides little metadata for review. However, its language use is instructive, as its listings generally state what an individual’s disability might be, such as polio complications, without becoming overly technical in language. The museum’s descriptions are extremely clear and offer excellent insight into how to describe material without falling into medical language. Their text for a photograph the musician Thomas Wiggins (Blind Tom), offers an example of this. It reads:

“Tom also composed his own works, the first at age five, titled “The Rain Storm.” He went on to learn thousands of compositions He toured Europe in 1886 and his fame

¹⁵ There is no single preferred term for individuals with microcephaly.

became known world wide. Tom went into semi-retirement in the 1880's playing his last concerts in 1904.”¹⁶

What is noteworthy about the description is that the label only discusses what Wiggins was well known for in composing music, where his musical abilities led him, and how he concluded his career. Little is said about ability or disability, only what he did and how he found success through his strengths.

The Jay T. Last Collection of Entertainment: Circus Prints and Ephemera is held by the Huntington Library and contains 650 items related to circus material. It also shares a number of similar subject headings to the Becker Collection. Unlike that collection, though, the subject headings used by the Last Collection deploy a different approach. Rather than use terminology such as “freak show,” the collection uses subject headings such as “Entertainment events—Pictorial works” and “curiosities and wonders—pictorial works.”

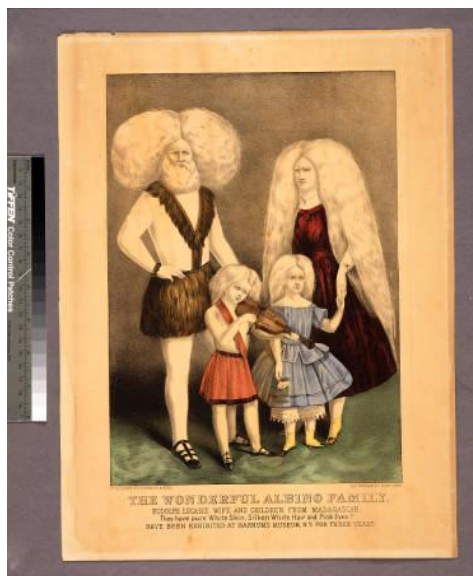


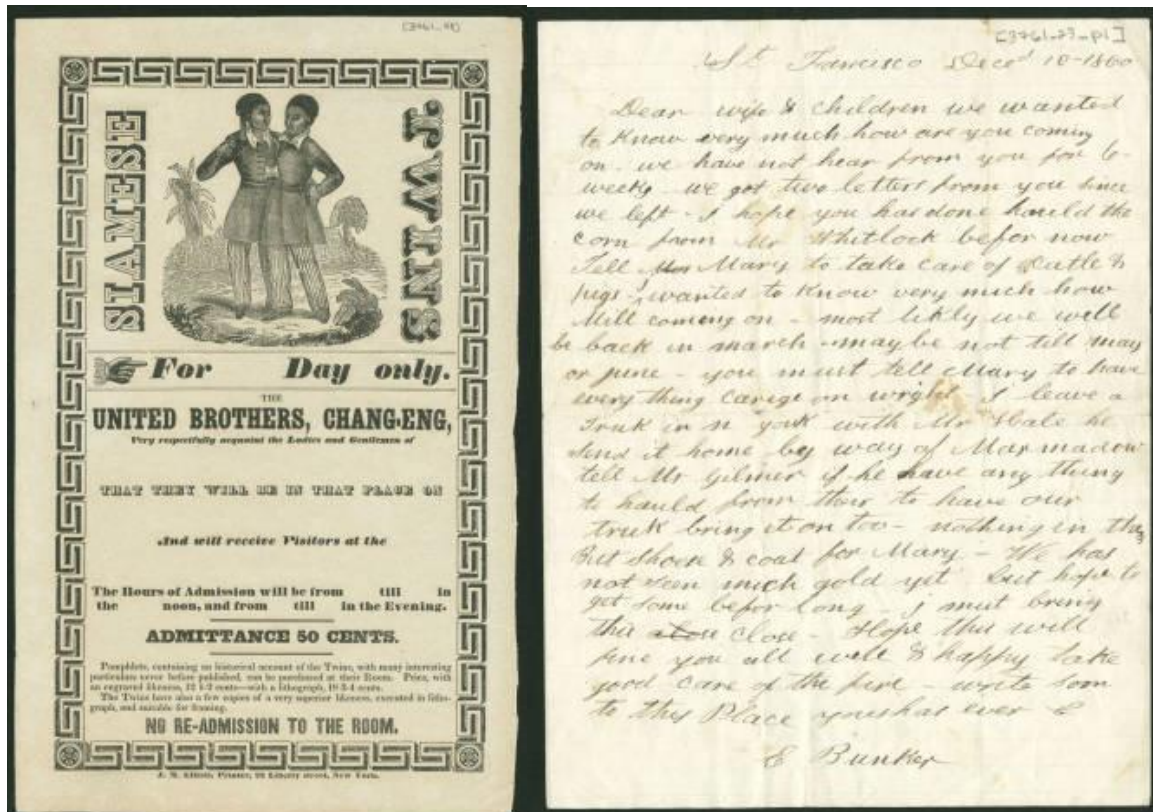
Figure 5. *The Wonderful Albino Family*. Courtesy Jay T. Last Collection of Entertainment: Circus Prints and Ephemera, Huntington Library, San Marino, California

The Wonderful Albino Family in figure 6 demonstrates the approach of the Last Collection in regards to specific items. The heading of “albinos and albinism,” which are contemporary preferred terms, is present; absent is the term “freak show.” The heading “Curiosities and wonders—pictorial works” is used but also included are the terms “children,” “families,” and “musicians” with the “pictorial works” subheading. By focusing on other elements in the image, the description presents a more well-rounded understanding of Rudolph Lucasie and his family, all without using a custom vocabulary. This approach accounts for the appearance of the family without overemphasizing their bodies. As a result, it falls into neither the medical nor social model of disability but instead uses complex embodiment.

¹⁶ Museum of disABILITY History, “Blind Tom.”

Owned by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the Chang and Eng Bunker Papers of the Southern Historical Collection at the Wilson Library boasts both a finding aid and a digital collection, much like the Becker and Last Collections. The Bunkers were conjoined twins from Siam (present-day Thailand), attached to each other near their livers.¹⁷ Having made a fortune after exhibiting themselves in Europe and North America, the two settled in the American South, bought a plantation, married, and had twenty-two children between them. They resumed touring after the South was defeated in the Civil War. Present in the papers are correspondence, bills of sale for slaves, business information, and ledgers, among other materials. Unlike previously discussed museum and archival collections where items have been curated by collectors, the Chang and Eng Bunker Papers are directly created by the two performers and contain not only material from their public lives when they were exhibiting themselves but also material that relates to their private lives as citizens in the American South, with the emphasis on their body only coming into play when material specifically addresses exhibition.

The subject headings assigned to the collection reflect this. While their disability is accounted for by using the terms “conjoined twins” and “abnormalities, human,” it is given little emphasis in comparison to other headings present such as “Families—North Carolina—Social life and customs,” “Agriculture—North Carolina—History—19th century,” and “Slavery—North Carolina,” which are just a few of the many terms that connect the brothers to North Carolina’s history. Individual subject headings assigned to the items that make up the online content of the Bunker Papers reflect a similar approach to the finding aid’s focus on North Carolina history.



¹⁷ The term “Siamese twins” derives from the Bunkers’ place of birth.

Figure 6 (left), exhibition broadside, and figure 7 (right), Chang and Eng Bunker letter to their families in the Chang and Eng Bunker Papers, no. 3761, Southern Historical Collection, Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

The exhibition broadside (fig. 7) reflects the public aspect of the item in question. Left blank to be filled in by the exhibitor, the broadside is a massive advertisement for the twins' show. The assigned subject headings are brief, using the terms "conjoined twins," "abnormalities, human," and "broadside." Letters and personal material feature specific-to-the-item material that engages in the historical significance of each item, such as seen in figure 8. The item, a letter from Chang and Eng Bunker to their families, still contains the headings of "conjoined twins" and "abnormalities, human" but also includes "Families—North Carolina—Social life and customs" and "Voyages and travels—History—19th century."

This approach mirrors that of the Jay T. Last Collection in an attempt to account for the various other aspects of the material present, especially with regards to the place of the papers within the Southern Historical Collection. It also shows how the concept of complex embodiment can be applied to archival collections from two creators with a disability and used to describe material relating to those with disabilities who are not alive to participate in arrangement and description. A number of perspectives are balanced through the assigned headings. "Conjoined twins" and "abnormalities, human" account for researchers who may use medical terminology or be unaware of changes in language as it relates to disabilities. The terms that relate to families and local history reflect the Last Collection's approach to description. Those same terms also reflect a complex embodiment approach, as there is an emphasis on the additional activities the Bunkers participated in beyond their self-exhibitions, including their place in the local community and their farming operation. This overall approach suggests that one of the best ways forward for material that represents historic individuals with disabilities is to ensure that the terms applied to the collection are wide-ranging and diverse, capturing the whole of the individuals' experiences, rather than reducing them simply to diagnosis.

The Barnum Standards

Initially, the P. T. Barnum Digital Collection wanted to develop its own local vocabulary to accurately and respectfully describe the material related to disabilities in the collection, taking its cue from the approach of the Disability History Museum. However, this was impossible due to cataloging software. Specifically, the Barnum Museum is a participant in test-piloting a custom-designed version of Collective Access, a web-based museum database whose users include the Chicago Film Archives, the Smithsonian Channel, and the New York State Archive. Among the many features of the database, Collective Access offers the ability to rely on linked data pulled from the following authorities: the *Getty Art and Architecture Thesaurus*, the *Getty Union List of Artist Names*, the *Getty Thesaurus of Geographic Names*, the *Library of Congress Subject Headings*, the *Library of Congress Name Authority Files*, and the *Library of Congress Thesaurus of Graphic Materials*. However, only authorized subject headings and names can be used from the Library of Congress because the Barnum Museum is participating in a pilot project, Connecticut Collections, to bring together collections from different history organizations in the state of Connecticut and make them accessible through one portal. This is modeled on a 2012 Collective Access project that brought together fifty-two collections throughout Nova Scotia into

one website portal, NovaMuse.ca. Consequently, the restrictions on subject headings and custom vocabulary are key to Connecticut Collection's end goal of uniformity to ensure high numbers of results for users engaging in searches across various institutions.

The issue of custom vocabulary did not apply to the Bridgeport History Center, which relies on PastPerfect for cataloging and collection management. PastPerfect allows for freeform and custom subject headings, but it does not have the linked data capability of Collective Access. Cataloging across two different platforms in two separate locations destined for the same digital collection demands uniformity and matching different fields to the same XML code before material is moved into the digital collection. In the case of PastPerfect, this means that the use of the software's ability to use custom vocabulary has been set aside in favor of using only subject headings available in Collective Access.

As a result of these limits, the Barnum project relies on the examples of the Last Collection and the Bunker Papers and their use of Library of Congress subject headings to create records that use complex embodiment theory. These tags are combined with the "people with disabilities" heading and related subheadings in order to respond to the struggles of researchers in Koford's article on disability studies scholars, as the subheadings address societal aspects of a given topic such as travel, jobs, and marriage. Medical terminology is still used by the Barnum Collection to allow researchers to focus on a specific group, such as all of the little people employed by Barnum over the years, and to account for those who use older terminology. This means that the metadata present in the digital collection is a mix of the social and medical models of disability. For performers with no subject heading due to unknown conditions (such as Isaac W. Sprague, the Skeleton Man, who began to lose extreme amounts of muscle at age twelve for unknown reasons), the term "people with disabilities" and appropriate subheadings are assigned.

Development of standards for subject headings likewise informs the policy for writing descriptions of items. Descriptions, as written into the grant submitted to the National Endowment for the Humanities, have to provide context for items as well as a general description of appearance. This demands a more museum-focused approach, and Collective Access, as a museum-focused system, provides the ability to write front-facing material for the public through the field "public access description" and include back-facing material for museum staff through the field "curatorial description." After determining that a local vocabulary was out of the question for the P. T. Barnum Digital Collection, the project team discussed and agreed that the public access description field would strive to use language that reflects the preference of living communities and mirror the approach in the "Scope and Content/Abstract" in PastPerfect. The team also agreed to employ people-first language when describing material and, whenever possible, include a brief biography in order to give a more complete picture of a performer's life.

For example, materials that relate to Charles S. Stratton that have catalog records in both Collective Access and PastPerfect use people-first language and refer to him as a little person, while one of the subject headings used is "dwarfism." A sample entry reads as follows:

Photograph cards of Charles Stratton as General Tom Thumb glued to cardboard backing, with three across and three down, totaling nine photographs in total. Printed at the top is "Gen. Tom Thumb in his Different Characters." The

characters included are: Citizen, Court Dress, Highland, Napoleon, Villikins, Our Mary Ann, Cain, Sailor, and Romulus.

Photographed by E. T. Whitney, Norwalk, CT, c. 1850s

Charles S. Stratton (January 4, 1838–July 15, 1883), known as General Tom Thumb, was a 19th century entertainer and little person who got his start with P. T. Barnum. Stratton's parents signed him with Barnum at age 4, as exhibiting those with dwarfism was lucrative at the time. Stratton took quickly to performing, and he entertained audiences worldwide, including nobility such as Queen Victoria. The characters illustrated in the photocards made up a large portion of his act when Stratton was younger. These cards are also an example of the merchandise sold with Stratton on it.

Stratton married fellow performer M. Lavinia Warren in 1863 and the two had a happy marriage. Stratton's performances brought him renown as a celebrity, perhaps one of the biggest at the time, and he and Warren were able to live comfortably when not working. On 15 July 1883, Stratton suffered a stroke and passed away. He is buried at Mountain Grove Cemetery in Bridgeport, Connecticut, with his wife beside him.



Figure 9. *General Tom Thumb in His Different Characters, ca. 1850s.* Courtesy the Barnum Museum

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS SUBJECT HEADINGS:

Dwarfism [info:lc/authorities/subjects/sh85040186];

Entertainers [info:lc/authorities/subjects/sh85044098];

People with disabilities [info:lc/authorities/subjects/sh85058663];

People with disabilities and the performing arts [info:lc/authorities/subjects/sh85058687];

People with disabilities—United States [info:lc/authorities/subjects/sh86006527]¹⁸

Standards are now in place for referring to performers collectively as well as for cases in which they were advertised as groups at Barnum’s American Museum or as part of the circus. No one involved with the project was comfortable with the terms “freak show” or “sideshow” and cited the baggage of the terminology as well as its anachronism, given that material from Barnum’s American Museum predates both terms. In looking at how P. T. Barnum referred to his performers, a few phrases stand out, including “human curiosity” and “natural curiosity.” Neither are within the Library of Congress subject headings. The term “human exhibit” is, but it is essentially the same as “human zoo,” and that phrase has very specific historical and racial connotations that do not apply to the vast majority of the Barnum material. The project settled on the Library of Congress subject heading “curiosities and wonders” after seeing it used in the Jay T. Last Collection and deciding that it was the best-fitting term out of all available.

Upon completion of the project, the P. T. Barnum Digital Collection will also include a note regarding terminology. This was inspired by one on the responses to the FAQs on the Disability History Museum’s website, which reads as follows:

What issues of language arise from the historical study of disability?

The use of language, or nomenclature, to describe disability has changed tremendously over the past two centuries. Some of the past usages are offensive and degrading and should be avoided in contemporary language. In cataloging historical materials, however, these terms are essential to recover past experiences and ideologies. Therefore, historical terms that would otherwise not be used today, do sometimes appear as a cataloged keyword. Historical terms apply only to the period in which an artifact was created and will not be used for artifacts created after that usage has gone into deserved oblivion.¹⁹

Such a statement allows the Barnum Collection to explain the decisions made regarding how it describes the performers within the collection, as well as makes the limitations of the project clear. It also allows for the collection to engage users in a nuanced discussion about the historical treatment of disabilities and the complicated space that the performers occupy. Finally, such a note permits the team to demonstrate the research and due diligence that went into making the decisions related to sensitive material, and their awareness that for some the final standards may not be ideal.

Conclusion

¹⁸ Barnum Museum, “Photograph: ‘General Tom Thumb in His Different Characters, ca. 1850s.’”

¹⁹ “Library: Frequently Asked Questions,” Disability History Museum.

The difficulties presented in cataloging the P. T. Barnum Digital Collection are not unique. Archives and museums have similar and sometimes identical material, and need to make them available to researchers. Equally important is the need to respect the sensitivities and preferences of living communities, especially in regards to historical material.

Most institutions rely on the Library of Congress subject headings for cataloging. The limits of the subject headings with regards to disability are set in stone until there is a concentrated effort to try to enact change, such as expanding the “people with disabilities” heading further; even then, that is likely a slow process. As such, all institutions share this limitation. But institutions, especially archival ones, do not have the advantages that the P. T. Barnum Digital Collection has. No one would expect an individual finding aid or a library record to have a lengthy discussion about why it used certain vocabulary terms, and archives do not typically work at the item level.

For archival institutions, including the Bridgeport History Center, the best way forward is to take advantage of the biographical/administrative field and the scope and content notes included in finding aids to address the potential societal model and complex embodiment aspects of a given collection. Biographical information, like the public access description in Collective Access, allows for a freeform approach. Sensitive writing that uses language preferred by the community the creator of a collection may be part of is entirely possible, as well as the deployment of people-first language *if* appropriate to the individual or group. Likewise, the scope and content notes allow for a brief statement about the individual and any disability that person had, as well as any additional notes the archivist feels compelled to make. The selection of subject headings should reflect an approach that does not focus solely on the individual and his or her diagnosis but also how the individual collection relates to a larger historical narrative, as the Chang and Eng Bunker Papers do. Collections that have digitized elements, such as the Becker Collection, the Jay T. Last Collection, and the Chang and Eng Bunker Papers can take the assignment of subject headings even further, providing extremely precise descriptions as to how an item relates to specific local history, entertainment history, or the subject’s personal life. Careful consideration of how to best accurately and respectfully describe the material should be taken into account.

These changes are incremental, and they do not completely resolve the complex nature of material that depicts nineteenth-century understandings of disability. There is no right way to do so. Society’s view on disability is ever-shifting, as is the vocabulary associated with it. What the material provides is a look into a specific point in time and space, and it allows researchers, educators, and the community at large to explore all of the nuances that the owner of an item, the individual depicted, or the collection creator lived with, as well as to place these individuals into a greater historical narrative.

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