

Freak Show: Grotesque Bodies in First-Generation Literature

The ocean is an integral part of the immigrant narrative. Prior to crossing the ocean, immigrants are considered normative; once they make that journey away from their homeland, their bodies are suddenly transformed in ways that shock them, ultimately characterizing them as “Other.” The children of first generation immigrants are certainly not excluded from this representation. In my paper, I will examine the ways in which young people negotiate the complicated terrain of being an immigrant and teenage body in a Western country, in two books about ethnic and religious stereotyping, Gene Luen Yang’s *American Born Chinese* and Randa Abdel-Fattah’s *Does My Head Look Big In This?* Both of these works expose contemporary Western ways of looking at ethnic bodies that tie into longer traditions in both the United States and Australia of freak shows and other spectacles of the grotesque. In fact, virtually all freak shows displayed ethnic people among their other “anomalous” bodies. Young adult fiction demonstrates the continued curiosity of the “racial freak.”

Employing Mikhail Bakhtin’s notions of the grotesque, I will examine the ways in which identity markers are made visible in horrifying ways in Yang’s novel. Both Chin-Kee, who represents exaggerated Western stereotypes of Chinese people, and Jin Wang, who is so ashamed of his Chinese body that he exchanges it for a white body, demonstrate the violence and marginalization that occur when ethnic bodies are put on display. I will also explore the ways in which Abdel-Fattah’s protagonist, Amal, comes to terms with her own body as a newly covered Muslim girl who already has to navigate the negative attention society gives to girls’ bodies. Amal undergoes a religious transformation, going from uncovered, or “normative,” to veiled, and therefore treated as “exotic” and “freak.” Nonetheless, what these teenage protagonists demonstrate is their ability to destabilize power hierarchies that render them visibly grotesque. “Danny” reverts back to his Chinese self and Amal rewrites the Western narrative surrounding the hijab through wit and humor (throwing the stereotypes back at her classmates), ultimately claiming agency over their bodies and representations.