

SPENDING TIME WITH THE PAST: INTIMACY IN HISTORICAL RESEARCH

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The work of the historian is to understand the past, and ideally to share that understanding with contemporaries. That understanding, though, can only be arrived at by understanding past people. The wider the lens, the less intimately you may need to ‘get to know’ an individual subject. My specific area of study, the dime-museum and circus sideshow, often trends toward microhistories: highly specific glimpses into small communities and individual lives. At this scale, the degree of intimacy developed between researcher and subject is relatively high, even if the documentary record is quite small. Ideally, I become a sort of confidant to my subject, to whom their stories, desires, even private thoughts are entrusted. Yet, it is a false intimacy, ultimately a parasocial relationship between unrelated parties.

In 2024, in the age of digital content creators and constant exposure to that content, the idea of the parasocial relationship is fairly common. First used in 1956 to describe the developing relationships of TV viewers to TV characters, the term refers to an “illusion of intimacy,” or a sense of closeness and connection one feels toward a celebrity or even a fictional character.⁽¹⁾ These relationships are essentially imaginary, lacking in reciprocity; taken too far, they can also lead to damaging and even dangerous behavior. Still, attachments to characters in whom we see aspects of ourselves reflected, or to people we admire, can be extremely important articulations of our sense of self. And, if it is your business to get into the head of a person who had passed away even before you were born, the ability to form this sort of attachment can become a research skill.

Writing on the subject of microhistorical research, entertainment historian Stephen Johnson observes that “significant personalities who are acknowledged as groundbreaking innovators in their profession or art tend to generate, or have generated for them, a self-serving narrative that obscures [certain] events or details.”(2) Vastly more common than these, of course, are the performers whose careers faded away with little explicit documentation and no intentional archival attention. These stories we discover through accidental preservation. For these historical characters, story is “measured in lines of text, not pages:” here a mention in a show’s broadside, there a probate document that happens to carry an old stage-name, or a half-inch of undated newsprint clipped for a scrapbook, scattered across collections and across geographies.(3) Frustrating as this hunt for material may be, as Johnson points out, the evidence it yields is sometimes more honest than the readily-available records of “significant personalities.” Although these less-known performers may have crafted a public persona in their lifetimes, they have not been rewritten or curated for posterity.

For whom would we sort through all of this material, if not an intimate relation? And who could dedicate this kind of time and energy to the cause of understanding a stranger’s life, without developing some sense of intimacy? The cause-and-effect flows both ways.

My current research centers on the sideshow character known as the Circassian Beauty (or, Circassian Girl, Circassian Lady, etc). Dozens of women played the part of the Circassian Beauty in American dime museums and sideshows from the Civil War period to the 1890s, but very little is known about the women themselves. Historian A.E. McDowall aptly summarizes the Beauty’s presentation as a “combination of racial characteristics; Caucasian skin, African hair, and Turkish-inspired clothing.”(4) The original Circassian Beauty, for example, who performed under the name Zalumma Agra beginning in 1864, was in private life a New Yorker named Johanna Nolan.(5) She retired to Pennsylvania with her husband and children after only a few years onstage, but gave her stage name (with spelling variance) on subsequent census documents. Scraps of information



(Zalumma Agra, hand-tinted photograph ca. about 1870. Photographer unknown. Author’s collection.)

about her career and her life after she retired are scattered through newspapers and probate records, census entries and advertisements.

Although her information is scattered and it is impossible to feel like I am 'seeing' her completely in any one source, through the process of 'getting to know' her, I do feel a certain degree of intimacy has developed in the way I relate to Johanna. Granted, she is unaware of me (barring certain metaphysical possibilities). Still, I admit that I think of her on a first-name basis and, although our lifetimes do not overlap, I tend to think of my time spent searching for her in the historical record as time spent with her. In a way, it might be a kind of violation - this accumulation of time I have spent with her, without her knowledge. I believe, however, that approaching the work with genuine curiosity and empathy counterbalances the intrusion.

(It bears noting explicitly here that in the context of historical research, there isn't necessarily a positive emotional connotation to the idea of intimacy. It is a neutral state of being, not a tacit agreement with your subject's views or approval of their actions. Something more than familiarity, but less than fondness.)

The work of the historian is to understand the past. To do this, we must allow ourselves to feel a certain parasocial intimacy with not just strangers, but strangers who could not have conceived of us in their lifetimes. In some cases, the people in our own lives will struggle to understand that interest, humoring us with polite nods while we expound on some newly-discovered shred of information. In this way, intimacy with the past can be isolating in the present. But whoever our subject might be, it is the motivation for and the result of the work. It reminds us to be faithful storytellers, even when we wish the story had been different. It motivates us to keep asking questions, even with no guarantees that the answers are preserved for us to find. The intimacy we feel with our subjects, although it is illusory, is both inevitable and essential.

References:

- (1) Psychology Today, "Parasocial Relationships." <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/parasocial-relationships>
 - (2) Johnson, Stephen. *Burnt Cork: Traditions and Legacies of Blackface Minstrelsy*. University of Massachusetts Press, 2012, 73.
 - (3) Ibid.
 - (4) A.E. McDowall, "Stars of the East and West: The Anglo-American Invention of the Circassian Girl." (Albany, NY: State University of New York at Albany, 2013), 5. The Circassian Beauty's bodily presentation and its cultural implications are complex, but for the sake of brevity I will confine myself to this summary.
 - (5) Lewis, Sarah Elizabeth. "Black Circassia: Frederick Douglass and the Performance of Racial Pictures." Yale University, 2015, 61.
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