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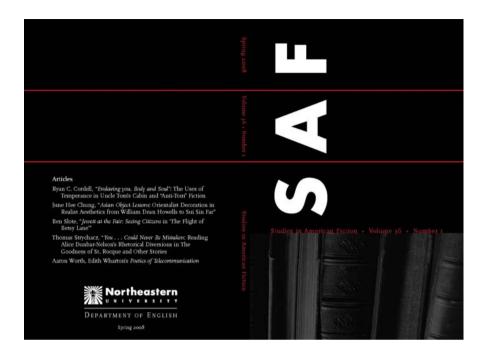
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# FREAKS AND THE AMERICAN DREAM: HORATIO ALGER, P. T. BARNUM, AND THE ART OF HUMBUG

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"It's my belief that you're a humbug," said the disappointed customer.

"Thank you, sir," said Rough and Ready; "I've been takin' lessons of Barnum, only I haven't made so much money yet." . . .

"Don't do it again, my lad. It's wrong to humbug people, you know. By the way, do you ever come to the museum?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, your joke is worth something. Here is a season ticket for three months."

—Horatio Alger, Rough and Ready

When Horatio Alger lets P. T. Barnum suddenly appear as a character in Rough and Ready, the fourth volume of his Ragged Dick series, he hints at a significant connection between Barnumesque humbug and his own fiction.1 In Chapter XV, which "introduces a distinguished personage" (167), the newsboy Rough and Ready not only dishes up humbug to the customer looking for coverage of horrible disasters, but he also falsely claims that P. T. Barnum, who happens to be walking by, is Horace Greeley. The duped gentleman, who "keeps a seminary in the country," eagerly speaks with Barnum as if he were Greeley, commending him on his "luminous editorials" and their "most satisfactory exposition of the principles which I profess" (172). Barnum goes along with the joke but confronts the newsboy afterwards, chiding him that "to humbug people is wrong." Nonetheless, in the same breath he also rewards the boy with a free season pass because "the joke is worth something." Overtly, the deception compares Horace Greeley's journalism to Barnum's humbug; but, less directly, Alger might also be speaking about himself and his attempt to capitalize as a fiction writer on the lessons in the art of humbug he learned from P. T. Barnum.<sup>2</sup>

This essay argues that the similarities between Alger's fictional practices and P. T. Barnum's exhibition strategies are central in understanding both the nature and the success of Alger's most famous and quintessential rags-to-riches story, *Ragged Dick* (1868)—a con-

text critics have overlooked. On the surface, Alger shows that Dick's education and improvement depend on his abandoning his favorite pleasures, such as going to Barnum's and to low theaters. Yet Dick's success, and the success of the novel, have much to do with the popularity and dynamics of freak shows. Partially designed by himself and partially by Alger, Dick is a freak, and our pleasure of reading about him is similar to the pleasure he himself seeks when he visits Barnum's museum. Ragged Dick is, like Tom Thumb, a charming miniature man, and his poverty and homelessness become curious and entertaining within this reduced scale. By offering his rags-to-riches story, the novel allowed its middle-class readers to indulge their curiosity and to face and appease fears about pressing social issues such as extreme urban poverty, immigration, the rise and threat of finance capitalism and its concomitant social mobility and fluidity. Ragged Dick's astounding success can be traced not so much to the professed message that any honest boy can make it to respectability and obtain the American dream with a lot of determination and a little bit of luck as to the way in which the novel, while professing this message, is also able to imply almost its direct opposite, namely that Dick is a freak and the American dream of rising from rags to riches a freak event. Dick's rise is an example of formidable Barnumesque humbug that happens only to those whom the middle-class audience enjoys and for whose performance they are willing to pay.

# Alger's Anti-Freak Show Message

Explicitly, Alger's novel, like his character Barnum, considers all forms of humbug wrong; the narrator notes that Dick's greatest flaw is his love for entertainment and the way he squanders his money on shows and spectacles. The novel opens with Dick waking up late because he had gone to the Old Bowery the previous night. "Another of Dick's faults," Alger's narrator explains, "was his extravagance. . . . He earned enough to have supported himself comfortably and respectably," but Dick "was fond of going to the Old Bowery Theatre" and other places, and he likes to smoke, drink, and gamble. It is central to Dick's rise to respectability that he stops spending his money on going to such shows. By the end of the novel, Dick proudly writes to his middle-class friend Frank that he "[hasn't] been to Tony Pastor's, or the Old Bowery, for ever so long" (172).

Alger's stance is, in most ways, hardly original. By the 1860s the Society for the Reformation of Juvenile Delinquents particularly con-

centrated on reforming the theaters and concert saloons because it saw them as "the breeding grounds of vice and lawlessness among the city's young people."4 And we can find similar views in a budding literature written for middle-class audiences about urban poverty, and particularly "street arabs," which emerged on the market during the same time and which Alger's novels echoed.<sup>5</sup> For example, James McCabe warns in his 1872 Lights and Shadows of New York Life that "a large part of the earnings of the bootblacks is spent for tobacco and liquors. These children are regular patrons of the Bowery Theatre and the low-class concert halls. Upon reaching the age of seventeen or eighteen the bootblack generally abandons his calling, and as he is unfit for any other employment by reason of his laziness and want of skill, he becomes a loafer, a bummer, or a criminal." Charles Loring Brace stresses in his 1872 The Dangerous Classes of New York that the poor urban boy's "more ideal pictures of the world about him, and his literary education, come from the low theatres, to which he is passionately attached."7

Alger clearly concurs with these authors. But unlike these other sources, Alger highlights Dick's particular fondness for Barnum's museum. "I'll guess I go to Barnum's tonight," Dick announces, "and see the bearded lady, the eight foot giant, the two foot dwarf, and the other curiosities, too numerous to mention" (19). When showing Frank around the city, Dick points it out: "Well, that's Barnum's. That's where the Happy Family live, and the lions, and the bears, and curiosities generally. It's a tip-top place. Haven't you ever been there?" (34). At the end of the novel, the now respectable Dick has stopped going to the theatres or to Barnum's museum, and, finding that his old rags are missing, he surmises that "maybe it's an agent of Barnum's" who has stolen them (184). Alger implies that Dick's rise to respectability means not only abandoning the low theatres but also cutting his ties to Barnum's museum.

This last implication, though, seems ironic in light of the fact that without his knowledge of Barnum's museum Alger's hero might never have risen in the first place. While Dick loves Tony Pastor's and the Old Bowery Theatre and gets some of his sense of drama from these sources, his imagination and his presentation of himself are most strongly shaped by the freak exhibits of Barnum's museum.<sup>8</sup> His success is very much that of a freak. Just as in *Rough and Ready*, within the logic of Alger's *Ragged Dick*, the lessons his hero has learned from P. T. Barnum are definitely "worth something."

### Ragged Dick, Self-Made Freak

Dick is full of humbug. Somewhat exasperated by studies of Alger, David Leverenz asks, "Why does nobody notice that this model of boyish honesty is lying all the time? Not only does Dick continuously fake upscale connections, but his linguistic bravado constitutes much of his appeal." I agree that critics have not sufficiently discussed Dick's "linguistic bravado" as one of his important assets; like Leverenz, many contemporary observers stressed the abilities "street arabs" displayed with language and wit. But Alger specifically suffuses Dick's linguistic performance with references to Barnum's museum.

Contemporary books stressed the rhetorical abilities of bootblacks and newsboys and traced them to the boys' love for melodrama and theatre. Brace's *The Dangerous Classes* notes: "The street-boys, as is well-known, are exceedingly sharp and keen, and being accustomed to theatrical performances, are easily touched by real oratory, and by dramatic instruction." He emphasizes the boys' sense of irony and humor: "a more lighthearted youngster than the street-boy is not to be found. He is always ready to make fun of his own sufferings, and to 'chaff' others . . . he is merry as a clown, and always ready for the smallest joke, and quick to take 'a point' or to return a repartee." Dick clearly has this "linguistic bravado" and sense of humor, but his bravado has a distinctly Barnumesque flavor.

Consider the first pages of the novel, in which the narrative focuses on Dick's verbal performance as he services a customer. "'Well, you know 'taint all clear profit,' said Dick, who had already set to work. 'There's the blacking costs something, and I have to get a new brush pretty often.' 'And you have a large rent too,' said the gentleman quizzically, with a glance at a large hole in Dick's coat. 'Yes, sir,' said Dick, always ready to joke; 'I have to pay such a big rent for my manshun on Fifth Avenoo, that I can't affor to take less than ten cents a shine" (5). When the customer inquires about his tailor, Dick responds: "The coat once belonged to General Washington . . . he wore it all through the revolution, and it got torn some, 'cause he fit so. When he died he told his widder to give it to some smart young feller that hadn't got none of his own; so she gave it to me" (5-6). Glenn Hendler comments that "Alger was intent on making [Ragged Dick's] ideological ancestry clear" by linking Dick to the founding father. 11 But in its immediate context the allusion seems more likely to point to Barnum's humbug, since in the same breath Dick also mythologizes his pants: "they was a gift from Lewis Napolean. Lewis had outgrown 'em and sent 'em to me,—he's bigger than me, and that's why they don't fit.' 'It seems you have distinguished friends. Now, my lad, I suppose you would like your money'" (6). The episode clearly shows that the customer pays for Dick's performance, which in general participates in the model and humor of low theaters and is, in specific ways, a very clever imitation of "perhaps the most profitable item [Barnum] ever stumbled upon: General Tom Thumb." <sup>12</sup>

Dick's jokes about size—claiming that he is smaller than Napoleon and further exaggerating his smallness through Washington's coat—suggest that he might be viewed as a midget, even though he is a child; Thumb, too, was exhibited as a midget when he was still a child. These methods of exaggeration—making children who were presented as dwarfs younger than they were, or by adding height to giants through hats and lifts—were "run-of-the-mill conventions of the business."<sup>13</sup> Dick turns himself into an exhibit, a humbug performance for which the customer pays. His play with literal, corporeal size is echoed in his verbal play with other relations such as insignificant/ significant, child/adult, servant/client, inferior/superior, homeless vagrant/owner of a mansion on Fifth Avenue, bootblacking/American business. In his interaction with this customer, Dick uses techniques of exaggeration, deception, and humbug that Barnum used in his freak exhibits; Dick turns himself both in economic and physical terms into a charming miniature man.

While Barnum's museum shared some of these techniques with the tradition of low theaters, Dick's first narrated performance particularly alludes to Tom Thumb's performances, such as his early imitations of Napoleon and a Revolutionary Soldier. 14 Dick's persona, like Thumb's, is astonishing because of "his distinguished friends," as the customer calls them. Barnum famously made huge business when Tom Thumb visited Buckingham Palace in the 1840s and met, and received gifts from, the royal family, including the Prince of Wales and the queen. "[T]he gifts . . . were placed on exhibition, and Tom Thumb's witty sallies were immediately publicized when he met the Duke of Wellington while dressed in the uniform of Napoleon, the duke asked him what he was thinking of and the general replied, 'I was thinking of the loss of the battle of Waterloo.' This exchange, said Barnum, 'was of itself worth thousands of pounds to the exhibition.'"15 Dick echoes these connections in this early scene and then again, even more explicitly, later in the novel: "'Oh indeed!' said Dick. 'You looked so much like the queen's picter what she gave me last Christmas in exchange for mine, that I couldn't help calling you by her name'" (83). And when Mickey Maguire asks him where he got his new clothes, Dick responds that "maybe the Prince of Wales gave 'em to me" (93).

Dick clearly models himself after Tom Thumb; he even alludes here to the photographs freaks sold of themselves that became coveted collectors' items. 16

But unlike Thumb, Dick is, of course, not physically a midget. He is rather what Robert Bogdan labels a "self-made freak," a new genre of freaks who unlike "form freaks" had no actual physical abnormalities but whose freak performance depended entirely upon presentation. By the 1860s, such self-made freaks had become increasingly common phenomena because freak exhibits had become so popular that there was a shortage of performers with actual physical abnormalities. For this type of exhibit the importance of autobiography became overwhelming, but in the end, as Bogdan emphasizes, these "self-made freaks" only highlighted what was true for all freaks: "Freaks were what you made them. How they were packaged, how they were dressed, how they acted, and what the audience was told about them their presentation was the crucial element in determining their success, in making a freak." As the opening episode exemplifies, much of Dick's success depends entirely on this self-dramatization as a freak in the tradition of Barnum's show.<sup>17</sup>

And like Tom Thumb's, Dick's success and appeal lie particularly in his sense of humor. While initially many freak exhibits were played straight, later in the nineteenth century they became more self-parodying and humorous, a mode that Tom Thumb mastered better (and earlier) than almost any other performer. "What made [the young Stratton] so charming as a young man was that he played his presentation so as to reveal to the audience that he was aware of the ludicrous poses he struck as they were. In this way they were not laughing at him; rather, they all laughed together."18 Unlike many other exhibits, Tom Thumb made clear that he was "fully aware of the context in which [he was] viewed": "much of Tom Thumb's appeal lay in the contrast between the small body and the sharp mind. Tiny as he was, he could hold his own in repartee with the Queen of England or draw a diminutive sword on her poodle when it threatened to bite."19 Dick strikes exactly this note, laughing with the customer about his own absurd claims about himself.

This pose served several purposes: it prevented audiences from resenting or exposing the humbug as actual fraud; it alleviated any discomfort audiences might feel when looking at a disabled person as a curiosity; and it helped the aggrandized presentation by putting the exhibited person, by way of his humor and intelligence, on the same level as the audience.<sup>20</sup> Dick's early performance in Alger's novel seems to accomplish exactly that—it allows the customer, as well as Alger's

middle-class readers, to laugh away with Dick the presence of his own abject poverty. In a way, Dick becomes an economic midget, one that middle-class Americans could increasingly not avoid seeing—particularly in New York City where the appalling living conditions of massive numbers of immigrants became more and more visible.<sup>21</sup> Voyeurism was a response to this increasingly obvious urban poverty, and Dick's performance eases the tensions Alger's audience might have felt about their own curiosity about the economically disabled, and particularly about homeless, impoverished children.

### Fiction and Humbug: Horatio Alger as P. T. Barnum

If Dick models himself after Tom Thumb, then we can see Alger as taking on the role of P. T. Barnum, exhibiting his freak hero to his audience. In his preface, Alger emphasizes the seriousness of his intent by placing his stories in the context of social reform; he "hopes that, while the volumes in this series may prove interesting as stories, they may also have the effect of enlisting the sympathies of his readers in behalf of the unfortunate children whose life is described, and of leading them to co-operate with the praiseworthy efforts of now making [sic] by the Children's Aid Society and other organizations to ameliorate their condition" (Ragged Dick, preface 1-2). Yet the narrator hints at the more voyeuristic aspects of the book when he notes that "to gratify the curiosity of my young readers, I will put down the items with their cost" (89).<sup>22</sup> Even though the choice of exhibit seems innocuous enough—just numbers—Alger's choice of words is significant: the "gratification of curiosity" brings the book much closer to a spectacle, an exhibit of "curiosities" (34) as Dick calls Barnum's exhibits.

At best, Alger's novel balances education and amusement in the same way freak shows did; after all, they too "were heralded as more than frivolous amusement: they were morally uplifting, educational, and prudent." This educational pretense was particularly relevant in the supposedly anthropological exhibits of savages, or the exotic mode of freak exhibits, to which Alger's narrative stance in *Ragged Dick* alludes. In this respect, too, Alger taps into an already existing market of books about urban poverty, which depicted the city as exotic and its urban poverty as a form of interesting savagery. At one moment in Brace's *Dangerous Classes* this stance becomes explicit, when he compares "street arabs" to Indians:

There seemed to be a very considerable class of lads in New York who bore to the busy, wealthy world about them something of

the same relation which Indians bear to civilized Western settlers. They had no settled home, and lived on the outskirts of society, their hand against every man's pocket, and every man looking on them as natural enemies; their wits sharpened like those of a savage, and their principles often no better. Christianity reared its temples over them, and Civilization was carrying on its great work, while they—a happy race of little heathens and barbarians—plundered, or frolicked, or led their roving life, far beneath.<sup>24</sup>

Alger depicts Ragged Dick as such a "happy barbarian and heathen with sharpened wit who lives far beneath" the "civilization" of middle-class America; he uses an already known underworld, an "ominous geography" with its exotic savages, the Street Arabs, to which middle-class audiences wanted to 'travel' in their reading. Mrs. George C. Needham in her 1887 Street Arabs and Gutter Snipes: The Pathetic and Humorous Side of Young Vagabon Life in the Great Cities, with Records of Work for their Reclamation suggested the parallel appeal of freak shows and books about urban poverty: "The Arab hunter must be prepared for endless freaks and multiplied dodges, else he will find himself outwitted in the end." Alger's novel shared its approach to its hero with these sources, and Alger knew that there was an audience eagerly reading reports of the adventures of "arab hunters" who dare to penetrate the jungle of urban poverty in pursuit of the freakish and exotic.

Alger uses an almost mock-anthropological voice to describe the strange customs of Dick and his likes, from his homelessness and dirtiness to his ignorance of the bible. "Washing the face and hands is usually considered proper in commencing the day, but Dick was above such refinement. He had no particular dislike to dirt, and did not think it necessary to remove several dark streaks on his face and hands" (4). Poverty and the lack of a home and sanitation seem here to be translated into a droll and primitive preference for dirt—a lack of a civilized need for cleanliness. Later, when Mr. Greyson tries to interest Dick in the church, Alger stresses the heathen aspect of his barbarian when he shows that Dick only responds to the music, the "children singing" (120). These emphases allow Alger to exhibit Dick as a specimen of a known other culture, a savage of the city. His exhibition of Dick is furthermore much in tune with the anthropological exhibits of non-Westerners in Barnum's museum, which did not aim at conveying actual knowledge of other cultures but which exoticized others and turned them into barbaric, savage freaks in order to make money.<sup>26</sup> Alger's novel, as so many other books about urban poverty,

thus turned an economic issue into a cultural one, transforming the poor into an exotic race and exhibiting a poor, homeless American boy as a curious street arab, an invented urban savage.

Despite Alger's professed interest in arousing sympathy for homeless children, his mock-anthropological approach to Dick helps prevent identification of the middle class with the abysmal living conditions of a homeless, urban orphan; it fosters curiosity rather than sympathy, self-contentment rather than genuine concern or pity. In freak shows, Bogdan observes, "'Pity' as a mode of presentation was absent . . . Promoters capitalizing on pity would have developed presentations emphasizing how difficult life was for the poor exhibits, how unhappy they were; they would have explained how the admission charge would help pay the exhibits expenses, relieve their suffering, and even lead to a cure for their affliction. That approach, however, did not draw or please crowds. Pity did not fit in with the world of amusement, where people used their leisure and spent their money to have fun, not to confront human suffering."27 In Barnum's "Some Account of General Tom Thumb," for example, pity is explicitly discouraged: "were he deformed, or sickly, or melancholy, we might pity him; but he is so manly, so hearty, and so happy."28 Dick, like Thumb, appears manly, hearty, and happy, and so middle-class readers could enjoy his adventures without undue consideration for the actual plight of the urban poor.

Alger, like many reformers, professed—and most likely felt—great sympathy for New York's homeless boys, just as P. T. Barnum stressed his friendly relations to his exhibits. Both men cast themselves in the roles of mentors and benefactors. Alger, who adopted and helped many homeless boys throughout his life, stressed that "a writer for boys should have an abundant sympathy for them" and should "exert a wholesome influence on his young readers. Mr. Barnum, a pamphlet announces, "naturally feels the deepest interest in his protégé, and is unceasing in his care of him and attention to his welfare . . . Mr. Barnum suggested and carries out a system of education, moral and religious, which cannot fail of conducing greatly to the future happiness of his wonderful charge. Nonetheless, by exoticizing their exhibits, both Alger's narrative stance and Barnum's exhibition strategies also introduced an element of exploitation into their relation to their exhibits.

Alger could have borrowed his approach to Ragged Dick from Barnum's fictionalization of Tom Thumb because he both stressed, like Barnum, an anthropological context for Dick and insisted on the latter's specialness, his exceptional qualities. Ragged Dick is a wonder among street arabs just as Thumb was presented by Barnum as an amazing exception amongst people with unusual size. Barnum created an elaborate exoticizing context for Thumb: "Ever since the commencement of the world," he opens a long mock-anthropological lecture in "Some Account of General Tom Thumb," "there has existed amongst all races of man, a common average as to height, size, and proportion." From there Barnum discusses races of giants and dwarfs: "The Patagonians are men who average six feet nine in height; the early navigators said nine feet, but modern research has proved their estimate to be very erroneous." The pseudo-scientific voice claims the accuracy of "modern research" and gains credibility by apparently diminishing rather than exaggerating the height of these giants. Then Barnum turns to "communities of Dwarfs and Pigmies" such as Esquimaux, Lapplanders, and African pigmies. Barnum sets up this ornate mock-anthropological frame for Tom Thumb, only then to exhibit him as a different kind of phenomenon: "whatever people's opinions may be of the existence of pigmy nations, the occurrence of individual, although infrequent specimens of dwarfs, from the very remote period unto the present day, is placed beyond all doubt, both by authentic records of fact, and by living breathing witnesses in our own time." Barnum's description of Tom Thumb stresses that he is the only one in his family to differ in size and that he is not exotic.<sup>33</sup> Absurdly, Thumb is both part of a long, documented history of human races and a unique, individual exception. He is and is not part of a deviant race, just as Dick is described by Alger both as part of a "race" of "street arabs" and yet entirely different, a wonder in itself, that sets him apart from those other "street arabs" and brings him closer to the middle-class audience.

As this example shows, there was much of a fiction writer in Barnum. Barnum's humbug was his form of fiction, just as Alger's fiction might be seen as his form of humbug. Impresarios like Barnum "fabricated freaks' backgrounds, the nature of their conditions, the circumstances of their current lives, and other personal characteristics. The actual life and circumstances of those being exhibited were replaced by purposeful distortions designed to market the exhibit, to produce a more appealing freak." These fabricated stories about the freak exhibits were offered as "true life stories"—a form of literary or even scientific realism that mirrors Alger's supposedly realist fiction, which is "sketched from life" but does not aspire to "strict historical accuracy" (*Ragged Dick*, Preface, 1).<sup>34</sup> Indeed, it is easy to see Alger's depiction of Ragged Dick as a "purposeful distortion" of true urban poverty and homelessness "designed to market the exhibit, to produce

a more appealing" image of the "street arab."

Harvey Blume argues that "the genres it was most crucial for Barnum to confound were those of fact and fiction"; "display, on the one hand, the claim of authenticity, on the other, are twin pillars of Barnumism and with them Barnum exemplifies the fixations of his age." Alger's fiction strikes the same balance; on the one hand, it insists on its realism through footnotes and historical and geographical references, and by basing the characters of Johnny Nolan and Mickey Macguire on actual boys; and on the other hand, in the midst of all of this realist detail it displays to us the wonder of Ragged Dick—a pure fabrication. And just as Alger managed to make the already known story of the "street arab" into an unprecedented success, Barnum managed to exhibit his freaks more successfully than anyone else did. Both Barnum and his disciple Alger had an ingenious sense for the humbug that the American public desired and would buy.

### Amazing Respectability: Freaks and the American Dream

If Alger's fiction depends for its entertainment value on Dick's freakishness, what happens when Dick becomes increasingly respectable? Many readers have felt that the novel loses much of its charm when Dick rises in class, and one might surmise that Dick stops being a freak at that moment.<sup>37</sup> But the amazing respectability of freaks was also an important part of Barnum's freak shows. Many freaks-particularly performers who were small, large, or missed limbs stressed their respectability in their exhibits and photographs and showed that the freak could lead a most normal, conventional life. For example, Tom Thumb was shown to lead a perfectly respectable life, just in miniature size, just as an armless performer might demonstrate how he could use his feet to sip a cup of tea, or the bearded lady would pose in a Victorian dress with her husband for a conventional family portrait. The appeal of these exhibits lay in the contrast between the one "freakish" feature (size, armlessness, or beard) and the conventions of middle-class life. These normalizing strategies became part of what Bogdan calls the "aggrandized mode" of exhibiting "form freaks," which "emphasized how, with the exception of the particular physical, mental, or behavioral condition, the freak was an upstanding, highstatus person with talents of conventional and socially prestigious nature." In poses of such amazing respectability, freaks were also presented as physically normal, even beautiful, apart from their one freakish feature.<sup>38</sup> Tom Thumb's appeal, in particular, had to do with the

fact that he was perfectly shaped other than for his size; he was always advertised as having "nothing dwarfish in his appearance—he is a perfect man in miniature." Dick also, Alger stresses, is normal other than for his one 'freakish' feature': his "raggedness." In the beginning the narrator affirms that "while Dick's appearance . . . was rather peculiar," "in spite of his dirt and rags there was something about Dick that was attractive. It was easy to see that if he had been clean and well dressed he would have been decidedly good-looking" (4). Like Tom Thumb, Dick is well built and attractive. Barnum went further when he emphasized Thumb's full functionality by exhibiting Thumb with his wife and "their child," a baby that was supplied to the couple for exhibition purposes—a gesture Alger strangely mirrors and queers when he has his miniature couple, Ragged Dick and Henry Fosdick, come to some fruition after "nine months" and later adopt a child together. 40

Beyond biological normalcy and ordinary respectability, the freak show emphasized that "the anomaly was a specific condition and did not reflect on the integrity or morality of the exhibit." Alger parallels the attractiveness of Dick's body with the unusual integrity of his character: "He was above doing anything mean or dishonorable. He would not steal, or cheat, or impose upon younger boys, but was frank and straight-forward, manly and self-reliant. His nature was a noble one, and had saved him from all mean faults" (8). 42 Aggrandized in a Barnumesque way, Dick's integrity exceeds that of every other character.

This integrity and strength of the freak lend itself particularly to a blending of freak exhibits and American dream narratives. For many performers "the invented identify was so flattering that they strove to become their stage persona." Some actually did rise in class and gain respectability, and many exhibits incorporated an American dream narrative into their presentation. Performers were shown to be amazing examples of perseverance and determination, able to overcome formidable obstacles. For example, commenting on the armless wonder Charles Tripp, one of Barnum's exhibits, an editorial announced that "he was a real hero in every sense of the word and overcame odds in life that would have submerged many a man with less determination and spirit." Similarly, the success of the armless Master Sanders K. G. Nellis as described in an 1840 magazine article was attributed to his industry and perseverance:

He executes many other things with his feet, which a vast majority of mankind cannot with their hands, without long and arduous practice. *In him, we have an instance of what can be accomplished by a strong mind, aided by indomitable perseverance and untiring industry.* 

Bogdan comments: "Such phrases suggested to onlookers that the exhibits' accomplishments and their ability to overcome disadvantages was a sign of their moral worth. The 'wonder' was not merely physical, it was the work of steadfast courage and perseverance." Freak shows were able to tap into the moral component of the myth of the American dream by showing how freaks used their inner strength to overcome their outer challenges.

Alger depicts Ragged Dick in a similar way. First, Dick is transformed into outward respectability by cleaning up and changing, a wonder he connects to Barnum's show. "Look at yourself, said Frank, leading him before the mirror. 'By gracious!' said Dick, . . . 'It reminds me of Cinderella . . . when she changed into a fairy princess. I see it one night at Barnum's'" (24). But more importantly, Dick is the only character in the novel that has the inner strength to overcome obstacles. He has "energy, ambition, and natural sharpness" (175)—the very features Johnny Nolan, who is based on a historical figure, lacks. As Alger's own American Dream boy, Dick rises in a world in which "energy and industry are rewarded" (10), while Johnny Nolan and many others are left behind.

Indeed, most other characters are left behind. <sup>46</sup> In that sense, Alger's novel is as ambiguous about the American dream as freak shows were. Bogdan notes that "by flaunting normal accomplishments as extraordinary, and by hailing people with disabilities as human wonders, aggrandized presentations probably taught the lesson that achievement for people with differences was unusual rather than common." <sup>47</sup> Alger's novel participates in this logic. Dick has to remain a wonder just as Barnum's freaks did. His very success is linked to, contingent upon, his wondrous otherness. Thus in Alger's novel, as in freak shows, the freak can never be allowed entirely to assimilate without losing his or her value. He always has to remain framed and, in a way, fictional; his value (entertainment and economic value) lies in a careful balancing between otherness and assimilation.

Ragged Dick relies precisely on this complex dynamic of both exoticizing and aggrandizing its central exhibit. While the first half of the novel mimics the exotic mode, the second half follows the normalizing strategies of freak shows. Aware that the second half can only remain interesting as long as it is connected to the first, Alger needs to remind the reader of Dick's otherness. While visual displays could easily depict the simultaneity of freakishness and respectability, the linearity of the novel and the fact that Dick has no physical abnormalities make it necessary for Alger continuously—and more and more forcefully—to reinscribe Dick's exotic, freakish nature as the latter

becomes more and more respectable or normal. For example, when Dick negotiates a position with Mr. Rockwell, the narrator comments: "Dick was about to say 'Bully.' When he recollected himself, and answered, 'Very much'" (183). The "recollection" is clearly Alger's, reminding the reader of Dick's otherness. Dick is only entertaining and appealing in the double persona of Richard Hunter/Ragged Dick. For that purpose, Dick tells his friend Fosdick that he will keep his bootblacking box and brush "'to remind me of the hard times I've had, when I was an ignorant bootblack' . . . 'When, in short, you were 'Ragged Dick.' You must drop that name and think of yourself now as—' 'Richard Hunter. Esq.,' said our hero, smiling" (185). Having Fosdick ask Dick to "drop" his name "Ragged Dick" is palpably Alger's way of not dropping it; it allows the author once again to hint at the interplay between the two personas, "Ragged Dick" and "Richard Hunter Esq.," asserting that, like "General" Tom Thumb, Dick can be one only by virtue of the other. Dick's smile as well as Fosdick's way of putting "Ragged Dick" and "Richard Hunter Esq." in quotation marks suggest that both boys recognize the performative aspects of Dick's Cinderella-like "transformation." Finally, Alger reminds us most forcefully of Dick's 'freakishness' when Dick, now out of his Napoleon/ Washington costume, exclaims in marked Ragged Dick lingo: "somebody's stole my Washington coat and Napoleon pants. Maybe it's an agent of Barnum's, who expects to make a fortun' by exhibitin' the valooable wardrobe of a gentleman of fashion" (184). Working against the linearity of a narrative that would truly describe a transformation from Ragged Dick to Richard Hunter—and thus would lose all Barnumesque appeal—Alger almost desperately tries to invoke simultaneity in the last pages so that we can read Dick's respectability as an integral part of his freak performance and so that Alger himself can make a fortune by exhibiting 'his hero's' rise from rags to amazing respectability.48

In some ways, Alger applied the same exhibition strategy to his own public persona, which depended on the double existence of his past as a pederast and his later, amazingly respectable life as child benefactor and author of juvenile fiction. Already physically exceptional for his short stature (at five feet two inches), Alger after his scandalous dismissal from the ministry for having molested boys had become in many ways himself a freak. (P. T. Barnum also exhibited himself in his own museum as an amazingly respectable "freak.") And his own rise to respectability balanced his otherness and his assimilation quite deliberately and carefully. His fiction turned a freakish abnormality, his propensity to abuse boys, into a profitable enterprise, even after

his dismissal. Glenn Hendler points out that Alger's public reacted against his "inexcusable desire to place his stories and himself in the public eye after the scandal" and notes that "Alger's indiscreet desire to publicize his 'familiarity with boys' persisted for several years, for in 1870 Henry James, Sr, expressed surprise and annoyance that 'Alger talks freely about his own late insanity—which he in fact appears to enjoy as a subject of conversation." In the context of Barnum's museum, Alger's strategy makes sense: he exoticized himself in order to stress his amazing and newfound respectability. Like P. T. Barnum Alger tried to remain in control of the show, exhibiting both himself and his novelistic hero as freaks who were able to overcome many obstacles and reach a curious, wondrous, freakish respectability.

### The Cultural Work of Alger's Freak Fiction

In *Sideshow U.S.A.*, Rachel Adams argues that "freak shows performed important cultural work by allowing ordinary people to confront, and master, the most extreme and terrifying forms of Otherness they could imagine, from exotic dark-skinned people, to victims of war and disease, to ambiguously sexed bodies." They provided "a stage for playing out many of the country's most charged social and political controversies, such as debates about race and empire, immigration, relations among the sexes, taste and community standards of decency." Alger's *Ragged Dick* was such a success, and has remained such a central American text, because like freak shows it allowed its middle-class readers "to confront, and master, the most extreme forms of Otherness they could imagine": extreme urban poverty and the traps and wonders of an emerging finance capitalism that promised both an exhilarating and frightening social mobility and rootless fluidity. 51

One "extreme and terrifying form of Otherness" for an 1868 middle-class audience clearly was the rapidly increasing population of the urban, immigrant poor. While such poor adults people the background of Alger's fiction, through his invented "street arab" Ragged Dick, the problem of extreme urban poverty gets literally both diminished in size—miniaturized—and humorized and colored so as to appear exotic rather than pathetic. As Lindsay Smith puts it in her discussion of Victorian photographs of "street arabs," the child becomes a "reduced form of ethnic other." Furthermore, Ragged Dick is also the least foreign street "arab" in the book. Much of the terror of this growing urban and impoverished population was that it was largely made up of immigrants. This fear of immigration is both registered

and solved in Alger's novel through the novel's latent anti-Irish message.<sup>53</sup> For example, Alger portrays Mr. Nolan, Johnny's father, as "a confirmed drunkard, [who] spent the greater part of his wages for liquor. His potations made him ugly, and inflamed a temper never very sweet, working him up sometimes to such a pitch of rage that Johnny's life was in danger. Some months before, he had thrown a flat-iron at his son's head with such terrific force that unless Johnny had dodged he would have not lived long enough to obtain a place in our story" (12–13). Later, Dick encounters the "stout, red-faced" Mrs. Mooney, and her servant Bridget and rents a room in their dirty and neglected house, where everything is described as unclean, "ragged," and in ill repair (84). And then there is Dick's rival Mickey Maguire, "a stout, red-haired, freckled-faced boy of fourteen," who "by his boldness and recklessness, as well as his personal strength, which was considerable, had acquired an ascendancy among his fellow professionals, and had a gang of subservient followers, whom he led to acts of ruffianism, not infrequently terminating in a month or two at Blackwell's Island" (91). Ragged Dick is clearly marked as different from any of these Irish characters. Like Tom Thumb, he is not like other "midgets"; there is nothing dwarfish (foreign) about him. He is a perfect American Anglo-Saxon man in miniature, supported by Mr. Greyson and Mr. Rockwell, and winning the war against the Irish most literally in his fight with Mickey Maguire and his gang. 54 Dick's American dream narrative assuages any fear of the rise of a growing immigrant population.

This ethnic agenda of the novel serves to mitigate the potentially threatening implications of a secular American dream narrative that asserts that everyone can make money and rise in class—a message for which Alger, and particularly Ragged Dick, have become famous. As Alan Trachtenberg asserts, Alger is often seen as "the single-minded ideologue for acquisitive capitalism."55 Or, as Albert McLean puts it, "money becomes, in [the] simplified, magical world of the Alger story, an all-effecting, all-moving mana of life."56 Part of the novel does indeed connect Dick's rise to the accumulation of money. On the first page, Dick awakens to the idea—typical of industrial capitalism—that time is money. From there, Dick's rise is connected to his saving money; "once the hero begins to 'rise' and achieves a modicum of domestic stability," Michael Moon observes, "the activity or habit that is represented as being indispensable to and initiating his personal ascendancy is 'saving.'"57 Throughout the novel, Alger gives us literally an account of Dick's change in spending habits, and his rise to respectability is seemingly parallel to his rising account balance. Here Alger overtly

follows closely the dogma of the Children's Aid Society, which posited that "the desire for accumulation . . . is the base of all civilization." The society "broke up" street boys' "especial vice of money-wasting" by having them open savings accounts so that "the small daily deposits accumulated to such a degree" that they would begin to feel a "sense of property" and develop a desire to accumulate more <sup>58</sup>

But what makes Alger's novel fascinating is that Alger is not entirely comfortable with this economic agenda; indeed, his novel ultimately resists it.<sup>59</sup> Repeatedly, Alger almost apologizes that his hero could possibly be seen as a capitalist. For example, when accounting for Dick's savings, he writes: "At the end of nine months therefore, or thirty-nine weeks, it will be seen that he had accumulated no less a sum than one hundred and seventeen dollars. Dick may be excused for feeling like a capitalist, when he looked at the long row of deposits in his little bank-book" (136).60 A little later, Alger again feels compelled to exonerate Dick from being a capitalist: "He was beginning to feel the advantages of steady self-denial, and to experience the pleasures of property. Not that Dick was likely to be unduly attached to money. Let it be said to his credit that it had never given him so much satisfaction as when it enabled him to help Tom Wilkins in trouble" (147). The narrator's encomium bristles with ideological tension and contradictions. Alger mitigates Dick's "pleasures of property" by making it an expression of "steady self-denial"; and he gives "credit" to his hero by showing that the money "gave" Dick "so much" satisfaction only when it is given away. Alger mixes gift and market economy and accumulation of wealth or self-interest and self-denial to rescue his hero from being a "capitalist."

While Alger thus registers some discomfort with an undue reverence for the merely "capitalist" virtues of earning, saving, and accumulation, his novel consistently exposes the wondrous and dangerously duplicitous nature of finance capitalism. As Dick shows Frank Wall Street, the narrator comments: "The reader would be astonished if he could know the amount of money involved in transactions which take place in a single day in this street" (68). This wondrousness is linked, throughout the text, with the sense of finance capitalism as swindle and deception, particularly through Dick's continuous references to owning Erie railroad stock. Right in the opening scene, Dick jokingly mentions that he has no change because "all my money's invested in the Erie Railroad." The customer replies that "that's unfortunate," going along with Dick's joke but also affirming that all Americans have been victims, and been impoverished by, the Erie Railroad scandal

(6). Later, Dick mentions his Erie shares again to Frank. A stranger, "Samuel Snap, No.—Wall Street," overhears them and offers Dick shares in the "Excelsior Copper Mining Company, which possesses one of the most productive mines in the world." (37). The "tall, gaunt" (36) stranger promises that "it's sure to yield fifty per cent. on the investment. Now, all you have to do is sell out your Erie shares, and invest in our stock, and I'll insure you a fortune in three years" (37). When the stranger leaves, Frank comments: "Perhaps you earn your money more honorably than he does, after all, . . . some of these mining companies are nothing but swindles, got up to cheat people out of their money" (37). The stranger, an agent from Wall Street, embodies the treacherousness of finance capitalism that the novel affirms throughout. And Dick's continuous mention of Erie Railroad stock in his invented public persona connects one of finance capitalism's most famous scandals with Dick's own freak performance.

Alger's warning, particularly in connection with the Erie Railroad scandal, was designed to fall on very fertile ground with a middleclass audience in 1868, when the scandal had the entire nation rattled.<sup>62</sup> Charles Francis Adams summed up its cultural importance: "no better illustration of the fantastic disguises which the worst and most familiar evils of history assume as they meet us in the actual movements of our own day could be afforded than was seen in the events attending what are known as the Erie wars of the year 1868." It was, in Adams' words, "a strange conflict that convulsed the money market, occupied the courts, agitated legislature, and perplexed the country." For Adams, the events surrounding the Erie railroad scandal "touch very nearly the foundations of common truth and honesty without which that healthy public opinion cannot exist which is the life's breath of our whole political system."63 What was most threatening about the Erie scandal was that it violated honesty and common truth since it confronted the public with "a fantastic disguise" they could not penetrate.

P. T. Barnum himself capitalized on the public's fear of an emerging finance capitalism in an outrageously ironic move. A master of all the wiles of capitalism and often seen as the inventor of modern advertising techniques himself, Barnum took on capitalism and its "greedy financiers" as one of the "humbugs of the world" about which he warned his readers as much as about "mediums, animal magnetists, [and] religious maniacs." Terence Whalen calls this stance "capitalist irony," which "involves a satiric self-awareness on the part of a narrator who has made a killing in the market, [while] this self-awareness exposes the illusory or arbitrary nature of an entire economic system." Barnum's ludicrous posture towards capitalism contained

exactly the kind of irony that Alger attributed to Barnum's attitude towards his own museum in his appearance in *Rough and Ready*. And Alger's own stance towards capitalism actually resonates with Barnum's ridiculous pose. Alger, like Barnum, warns of finance capitalism as a dangerous form of humbug because it meddles with truth and fiction, the very modes that both men continually manipulated themselves. But Alger also—rather sincerely—offers its readers an alternative economic logic: the logic of gift exchange.

Recall that Alger stresses that to his "credit" Dick felt pleasure in property only when it was connected to the possibility of giving, of helping others (147). Surprisingly, Alger's novel—so often read as an endorsement of capitalist entrepreneurship—is structured not so much around consistent earnings as around a series of gift transactions.66 These transactions—voluntary, spontaneous, coincidental, and moral—are what allow Dick to rise, not his increased ability to save and work. This pattern of gift transactions—from buying drinks to receiving clothes to receiving and giving money—reaches its climax in the end, when Dick, risking his own life, rescues a boy who fell in the water. This final gift of life allows Dick finally to rise into respectability. Alger stresses that Dick's motive in this instance is not monetary: "He no sooner saw the boy fall than he resolved to rescue him. His determination was formed before he heard the liberal offer made by the boy's father. Indeed, I must do Dick the justice to say that, in the excitement of the moment, he did not hear it at all, nor would it have stimulated the alacrity with which he sprang to the rescue of the little boy" (178). Thus, the economic logic of the novel—as Dick's motivation in this final scene—is ultimately neither that of finance capitalism nor that of working and saving; rather, it is the logic of the gift.

Noting the importance of luck in the novel, Alan Trachtenberg argues that "the real magic and charm of *Ragged Dick* is the way the narrative makes money and desire coincide. There is something fabulous and otherworldly about such consistency. In Horatio Alger's world, once mistaken by readers young and old for America itself, all good wishes come true." The "fabulous" and "otherworldly... consistency" of the novel is its faith in the gift—a faith that allows Alger's readers to replace the fearful vision of a fluid social mobility with the faith in a moral order in which they, themselves, are in control in so far as they can choose to give or not. That Dick's rise is dependent on a series of gift transactions—transactions that often defy the spirit of capitalism entirely and that become freak accidents in an alienated urban environment—alleviates possible anxieties about a threatening upheaval of social classes, an uncontrollable society in which every-

one, who speculates on the right stock, can make it overnight.<sup>68</sup> Far from making it on his own, Dick rises because he performs for the rich and gets selected again and again, based on his personal gifts.

Freak shows, too, rewarded gifts. Looked at through an economic lens, what made freak shows so wondrous was that they exhibited an incredible, unbelievable reversal of values; they turned an absence of value, such as a handicap, into a phenomenal value, a gift: a freakishness that could be sold in exhibits and pictures. This astonishing reversal of value is concomitant with the curious spectacle of finance capitalism, which also manipulates value in extraordinary, spectacular, even freakish ways. Both freak shows and an emerging finance capitalism offered to the amazed American middle class a comedy of values that turned ordinary into extraordinary and played with both fact and fiction to create value and to arouse in them both interest and speculation. But the freak show was much safer than the world of Wall Street; freaks always remained freaks, able to succeed only through the consent of the audience. Their amazing respectability might have almost reassured the audience that the American dream was a rare, freakish, staged event, which happened only as long as they paid the performer.

Just as Rachel Adams claims of freak shows, Alger's novel was, and has remained, "a stage for playing out many of the country's most charged social and political controversies." It is this quality that has transformed it from an ephemeral piece of juvenile fiction into an iconic American text. On April 6, 2001, when President George Bush congratulated winners of the Horatio Alger award, he still emphasized the centrality of Alger's message: "The Horatio Alger Society is dedicated to really one of the basic truths about this country, and I hope this home remains dedicated to the same truth. In America, we believe in the possibilities of every person. It doesn't matter how you start out in life; what really matters is how you live your life. That has always been our creed." And while the president acknowledges that Alger's stories "were just stories" that "had a point and showed young readers the way," he remarks in the very next sentence that "such stories are still written in America, in every town and city, every day and in real life"69 Unlike Barnum's museum, Alger's freak fiction amazingly never quite lost its credibility, cultural centrality, and respectability. Alger is still a household word in American ideology. Perhaps this is so because Alger's juvenile fiction/humbug offers a version of the American Dream that no middle-class American needs to fear.

### Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Horatio Alger, *Rough and Ready* (Philadelphia: The John Winston Co., 1897), 169.
- <sup>2</sup> Neil Harris points out that this connection was rather usual; see *Humbug*, *The Art of P. T. Barnum* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1973), 172.
- <sup>3</sup> Horatio Alger, *Ragged Dick* (New York: Signet Classic, 1990), 7. Hereafter cited parenthetically.
- <sup>4</sup> Robert Snyder, *The Voice of the City: Vaudeville and Popular Culture in New York* (Chicago: Ivan Dee, 2000), 7.
- <sup>5</sup> Marcus Klein, *Easterns, Westerns, and Private Eyes* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1994), 34.
- <sup>6</sup> James D. McCabe Jr., *Lights and Shadows of New York Life; or, Sights and Sensations of the Great City* (1872; New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1970), 740.
- <sup>7</sup> Charles Loring Brace, *The Dangerous Classes of New York and Twenty Years' Work Among Them*, 3rd ed. (1880; repr. Montclair, NJ: Patterson Smith, 1967), 98.
- <sup>8</sup> Of course, there are strong connections between Barnum's museum and the theatrical conventions of the low theaters Alger mentions. The allusions to the Old Bowery Theatre and to Tony Pastor are particularly interesting in defining the context of Barnum's museum—and Alger's novel. As Robert Snyder points out, Barnum offered his museum as a respectable alternative to the Old Bowery Theatre, cleaning its acts up for middle-class audiences (7). Tony Pastor, who started his career as a child prodigy with Barnum, in turn opened his theater famously to clean up the acts of the low theaters and offer vaudeville entertainment suitable for middle-class audiences (Snyder, 12–13). See also Douglas Gilbert, *American Vaudeville: Its Life and Times* (New York: Dover, 1963), 103.
- <sup>9</sup> David Leverenz, "Tomboys, Bad Boys, and Horatio Alger: When Fatherhood Became a Problem," *American Literary History* 10 (1998), 232.

<sup>10</sup> Brace, 79-80, 98.

- <sup>11</sup> Glenn Hendler, *Public Sentiments: Structures of Feeling in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2001), 95.
- <sup>12</sup> Harris, 43.
- <sup>13</sup> Robert Bogdan, *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1988), 97.
- 14 Bogdan, 150.
- <sup>15</sup> Harris, 96. Later Barnum put Thumb in great company again when he exhibited "wax figures of Napoleon, Victoria, Tom Thumb, Christ and his disciples, and many historical figures" (Harris, 165).
- <sup>16</sup> Bogdan reports that freaks customarily sold photographs of themselves. For example, "Lavinia Warren, Tom Thumb's wife, was referred to as the most photographed woman in the world. She ordered fifty thousand pictures of herself at a time . . . and these were widely available from photography vendors" (15).
- <sup>17</sup> Bogdan, 239, 242, 95. Eric Fretz describes how nineteenth-century American culture began to "[celebrate] the individual's ability to stylize a public persona and assert these artificially constructed identities into the public sphere." "P. T. Barnum's Theatrical Selfhood and the Nineteenth-Century Culture of Exhibition," in *Freakery*, ed. Rosemarie Garland Thomson (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1996), 98. Barnum's exhibits and self-representation, as well as Dick's constructed identity, can be understood in this cultural context.
- 18 Bogden, 114, 152.
- <sup>19</sup> Harvey Blume, "Ota Benga and the Barnum Perplex," in *Africans on Stage*, ed. Bernth Lindfors (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1999), 197.
- <sup>20</sup> Bogden, 114, 215.
- <sup>21</sup> This visibility was foregrounded later by Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives* (1890; repr. New York: Dover Publications, 1971).
- <sup>22</sup> This exhibit may also allude to Thoreau's exhibit of his numbers in *Walden*, which could be seen as an American dream narrative.
- <sup>23</sup> Bogden, 104.
- <sup>24</sup> Brace, 97.
- <sup>25</sup> Quoted in Klein, 42.
- <sup>26</sup> Bogdan, 177.
- <sup>27</sup> Bogdan, 277.

- <sup>28</sup> P. T. Barnum, "Some Account of General Tom Thumb, The Man in Miniature," *Barnum's American Museum Pamphlet* (1854). 6.
- <sup>29</sup> Exhibitor Sam Gumpertz, "freak show czar of Coney island and perhaps the most active twentieth-century importer of non-Western sideshow attractions" (Bogdan, 197), claimed: "I got along splendidly with these Dahomey tribesmen. I am lucky that I understand them . . . I like them instinctively. They seem to know that. We always get along. We are in sympathy, as the Latins say" (quoted in Bogdan, 198).
- <sup>30</sup> Horatio Alger, "Writing Stories for Boys," The Writer (March 1896), 37.
- 31 Barnum, "Some Account," 8.
- <sup>32</sup> For an extensive discussion of the exploitative nature of Barnum's relation to his performers, see David A. Gerber's "The 'Careers' of People Exhibited in Freak Shows: The Problem of Volition and Valorization," in *Freakery*, 38–54.
- <sup>33</sup> Barnum, "Some Account," 1–3.
- 34 Bogdan, 95, 105.
- 35 Blume, 194.
- <sup>36</sup> In his essay "Are My Boys Real?," *Ladies Home Journal*, November 1890, Alger stresses that he based his characters on real boys—with the exception of "Ragged Dick" whose name was real, "but I never knew the boy who bore it" (29). See also Gary Scharnhorst and Jack Bales, *The Lost Life of Horatio Alger, Jr.* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1985), 82.
- <sup>37</sup> For example, Gorman Beauchamp writes: "As Dick exchanges his rags for his respectability, the juice drains out of him; as he becomes good, he becomes gray." "Ragged Dick and the Fate of Respectability," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 31, no. 1 (1992), 332.
- 38 Bogdan, 108-9.
- 39 Barnum, "Some Account," 5.
- The wedding, staged in 1863, was a sensation of this kind; it stressed Tom Thumb's physical normality, his ability to lead a conventional respectable life. While much of the novel is homoerotic, Alger also hints at a heterosexual courtship when he has Dick meet Ida—Princess Ida was another famous performing midget—and Dick gets normalized into a middle-class drawing room and the early forms of heterosexual courtship. At the same time, as Michael Moon observes, Alger also hints at an impossible gestation period when he "specifies . . . [that] nine months after [Dick and Fosdick] move in together . . . Dick is said to bring forth a little bundle." Further, as Moon points out, the two boys adopt a child in the third volume of the series. Michael Moon, "The Gentle Boy from the Dangerous Classes': Pederasty, Domesticity, and Capitalism in Horatio Alger,"

Representations 19 (Summer 1987), 99.

- <sup>41</sup> Bodgan, 110.
- <sup>42</sup> In many ways, Ragged Dick fits the image of the noble savage, a concept that exotic exhibits relied upon (Bogdan, 178). But since Alger stresses that Dick is an exception amongst the street arabs, the emphasis on his honesty is also strongly reminiscent of the exhibition of form freaks.
- 43 Bodgan, 147.
- 44 Quoted in Bogdan, 222.
- 45 Bogdan, 216 (emphasis Bogdan's), 217.
- <sup>46</sup> Henry Fosdick rises with Dick. But Alger describes Fosdick as much too timid to make it on his own (102), and furthermore Fosdick is a middle-class boy who had lived in "every comfort" until his father, a printer, drowned and left him orphaned (104). Fosdick thus will only be restored to his middle-class origin.
- 47 Bogdan, 278-79.
- <sup>48</sup> The strain in these last pages hints at the problems Alger will face in the subsequent volumes of the "Ragged Dick" series. Alger tries to solve that problem by introducing new freaks, but none have the charm of Dick. Ragged Dick remained as unique in his appeal as Tom Thumb did. Alger "could not have guessed," write Scharnhorst and Bales, "that, at the modest age of thirty-five, he had written his best book, and that he would try in vain the remainder of his life to surpass it"(87).
- <sup>49</sup> Hendler, 431. Scharnhorst and Bales stress in their biography of Alger that after this incident Alger remained silent about this issue for the rest of his life; see *The Lost Life of Horatio Alger, Jr.* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1985), 70. It should be noted, though, that Alger published a thinly-veiled poem about his "sin" in 1872 ("Friar Anselmo," *New York Weekly* August 5, 1872).
- <sup>50</sup> Rachel Adams, *Sideshow U. S. A.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 2–3.
- <sup>51</sup> It also hints at another kind of otherness: a vaguely homoerotic lifestyle amongst the street arabs. For a discussion of that aspect of the novel see Moon.
- <sup>52</sup> Lindsay Smith, *The Politics of Focus* (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1998), 111.
- <sup>53</sup> John G. Cawelti notes that "the old maxim 'No Irish Need Apply' still held for Alger"; see *Apostles of the Self-Made Man* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1965), 110. Scharnhorst relates that Alger's own adoptive fatherhood had "distinct ethnic overtones. He was proud of the Anglo-Saxon descent of all the boys he adopted" (125).

- <sup>54</sup> For a discussion of anti-Irish sentiments in New York City see Michael A. Gordon, *The Orange Riots: Irish Political Violence in New York City Between 1870 and 1872* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1993).
- <sup>55</sup> Alan Trachtenberg, Introduction to *Ragged Dick* (New York: Signet Classic, 1990), vii.
- <sup>56</sup> Albert F. McLean, *American Vaudville as Ritual* (Lexington: Univ. of Kentucky Press, 1965), 9.
- <sup>57</sup> Moon, 99.
- <sup>58</sup> Brace, 104–5.
- <sup>59</sup> For a full-fledged account of a long history of capitalist "misreadings" of the novel see Gary Scharnhorst, "Demythologizing Alger," *Markham Review* 10 (Fall 1980-Winter 1981), 20–27.
- <sup>60</sup> The reference to nine months hints at more organic patterns of creation, gestation, and giving birth—a cycle of life rather than a merely linear, numerical accumulation of wealth.
- <sup>61</sup> Dick mentions his Erie shares again on page 113. They become a kind of standing joke in the novel.
- <sup>62</sup> See Robert Sobel, *Panic on Wall Street: A History of America's Financial Disasters* (London: The MacmillanGroup, 1968), 128–35.
- <sup>63</sup> Charles Francis Adams, Jr. and Henry Adams, *Chapters of Erie* (1871; repr. Ithaca: Great Seal Books, Cornell Univ. Press, 1956), 3.
- <sup>64</sup> Harris, 215.
- <sup>65</sup> Terence Whalen, Introduction, *The Life of P. T. Barnum* (1855; Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 2000), xvi–xvii.
- <sup>66</sup> Malcolm Cowley noted as early as 1945 that "I cannot understand how [Alger] should come to be regarded as the prophet of business enterprise" (quoted in Scharnhorst, "Demythologizing Alger," 20). While critics have repeatedly noted that Alger is not endorsing capitalism in a way people generally believe, none has written about the consistent way in which Alger depicts and explains at length the workings of gift exchange.
- <sup>67</sup> Trachtenberg, xx. W. T. Lhamon, Jr., also stresses the importance of luck in the novel; see "Horatio Alger and American Modernism: The One-Dimensional Social Formula," *American Studies* 17 (1976), 19.
- <sup>68</sup> This fear is explicitly addressed in McCabe's *Lights and Shades of New York*. In a chapter on "Stock Gambling" McCabe writes: "Fortunes are made quicker and lost more easily in New York than in any place of the world. A sudden rise in

stocks, or a lucky venture of some other kind, often places a comparatively poor man in possession of great wealth. Watch the carriages as they whirl through Fifth Avenue, going and returning from the park. They are as elegant and sumptuous as wealth can make them. The owners, lying back amongst the soft cushions, are clad in the height of fashion. By their dresses they might be princes and princesses. This much is due to art. Now mark the coarse features, the ill-bred stare, the haughty rudeness which they endeavor to palm off for dignity. Do you see any difference between them and the footman in livery on the carriage box? Both master and man belong to the same class—only one is wealthy and the other is not. But the footman may take the place of the master in a couple of years, or less time. Such changes may seem remarkable, but they are very common in New York" (281).

<sup>69</sup> "President Bush Congratulates Winners of Horatio Alger Awards." <a href="http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/04/20010418-4.html">http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/04/20010418-4.html</a>. The Horatio Alger Association's Award recognizes those who "demonstrate individual initiative and a commitment to excellence—as exemplified by remarkable achievements accomplished through honesty, self-reliance, and per-severance" (website, section on Horatio Alger Award).