

Freaks in Public: Reading the Freakish in Contemporary American Literature and Culture

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Abstract

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The presence of freaks in American literary texts, particularly as they re-emerge in late 20<sup>th</sup> century works, articulate a complex set of relationships that define what Elizabeth Grosz calls “acceptable, tolerable, knowable humanity” played out by audiences and actors on a national stage (55). This dissertation investigates the freak as a figure of critical potential for both reclamation and appropriation through feminist, queer, and disability studies lenses. It tracks the shifting relationships between “freaks” and U.S. national culture, illustrating how the freak serves as a powerful figure that disrupts binary logics and expands the knowable limits of public life. However, it also recognizes that the power of the freak is double-edged, illustrating how the resurgence of freak shows in the postmodern cultural landscape has also enabled the appropriation of freakishness by “norms” through the same powerful logics of exceptional individualism and diverse pluralism that configure the freak show as a “freaktopia.”

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## INTRODUCTION

“You hand in your ticket and you go watch the geek  
Who immediately walks up to you when he hears you speak  
And says, ‘How does it feel to be such a freak?’”

--Bob Dylan, “Ballad of a Thin Man”

I met Lydia Ransom, the world’s only blind burlesque performer, in summer 2012. At the time, we were both cast in the same show, and because our backstage spaces were next to one another, I became, as we sometimes joked, her “seeing eye stripper” – helping her fasten complicated parts of her costume and touching up her eye makeup before she hit the stage. I was not always a good “seeing eye stripper.” Once, I failed to realize that a makeup setting spray contained alcohol, which caused painful irritation in Ransom’s blind eye and necessitated lots of eye-flushing, cleaning and reinserting her scleral shell, and a complete re-do of her makeup that night. We now refer to this incident as “that time I blinded her,” which she finds perversely funny.

By day, Ransom is Elsa Sjunneson-Henry, a feminist historian who writes and edits a blog called *FeministSonar*, which addresses feminist issues through a disability lens. Because we were both performers and scholars, Sjunneson-Henry and I became fast friends. She was finishing revisions on her master’s thesis, and I was in the midst of reading for my Ph.D. qualifying exams. We discussed the strange balance of being scholars by day and showgirls by

night. For Sjunneson-Henry, her work on the legal history of striptease clearly related to her experience in burlesque. I, on the other hand, have never been in a freak show, although I've seen a few neo-sideshow performances and know many circus artists, body manipulators, sword swallows, bearded ladies, and other unique and wonderful people who trade in the cabaret arts. Historically speaking, burlesque often appeared in sideshows in what was known as the "cooch tent," so the two genres have always been easy friends, providing so-called "lowbrow" entertainment that invited audiences to marvel at the human body in all its strange, fleshy glory.

My performance work has greatly informed my interest in reading literature alongside performance as part of a larger critical inquiry. Because I am a performer and a scholar, I see stages as sites of critical practice, places in which representational politics can be challenged and reframed, places where the body is always present and always matters. My work onstage is always about my body and about being embodied, and this highly embodied performance practice has made me wonder how bodies and states of embodiment might be represented in non-corporeal forms. That is: how do we read bodies, especially bodies of difference, in literary and cultural texts? And how do reading practices in turn shape the body itself? These questions about the role of the body as a literary and cultural text guide my study of the freak show, holding literature and performance in what Douglas Conquergood calls a "horizontal, metonymic tension" (151). Because freaks fundamentally appeared on stages, what power did they hold in the literary imagination? What cultural work did the freak perform on stages throughout nineteenth and early twentieth century America? And what lasting power did these anomalous bodies hold in the contemporary moment?

As I shared these thoughts with Sjunneson-Henry over lunch, she asked me for my opinion of contemporary freak shows such as Coney Island's Sideshow by the Seashore, where

our mutual acquaintance Mat Fraser has performed both as a striptease artist and a freak with his “Sealboy” act. Not having seen one at the time, I couldn’t answer her question with any conviction, but I proffered that I liked the idea that freak shows had, like the burlesque we both so dearly loved, revived and transformed a nineteenth century art form into something new. We often refer to the neo-burlesque movement as a reclamatory one, taking a performance practice that once was about the objectification of women’s bodies and transforming it into an act of liberation. I suggested the same might be true of neo-sideshow. “I don’t think freak shows can ever be reclaimed as long as there are able-bodied people in them,” Sjunneson-Henry countered.

For Sjunneson-Henry, freak shows were the one cultural space dominated by bodies like hers: disabled bodies. It was a place where persons with disabilities could, as Lil Binewski states in *Geek Love*, “make a living simply by being themselves” (Dunn 7). And if freak shows were to be reclaimed as a kind of disabled theatre, this work needed to be done exclusively by performers with disabilities. I certainly understand Sjunneson-Henry’s perspective, but her desire to re-center the freak show as a purely disabled space erases the history of all of the other anomalous bodies that performed in freak shows: queer and intersex bodies, racialized bodies, and numerous able-bodied people who performed as specialty acts or were made into freaks through a combination of elaborate storytelling and costuming. “Freak” is a slippery appellation, signifying more than one type of otherness at any given time. In working on this project, I treat “freak” as a multivalent category, further opening up the reclamatory potential of both the word and the genre.

Though the term “freak” has fallen out of favor as a descriptor of persons with anomalous bodies, the term does retain its metaphoric currency: to call someone a freak or to describe their qualities as freakish is to marginalize them, to align them with the Elephant Man,

the Half-and-Half, or the Dog-Faced Boy. This metaphor offers contexts for understanding difference-as-other-to-the norm, and thus the freak has appeared in many guises – the Tattooed Lady, the Siamese Twin, the Seal Boy, the Wild Man – within American literature. The presence of freaks in American literary texts, particularly as they re-emerge in late twentieth century works, articulate a complex set of relationships that define what Elizabeth Grosz calls “acceptable, tolerable, knowable humanity” played out by audiences and actors on a national stage (55). This dissertation investigates the limits of “acceptable, tolerable, knowable humanity” posed by “the freak” within the context of American literature and performance art, and defines how the contemporary embodiments of the freak challenge and transform these limitations on public life. It is in posing such challenges that the freak achieves its critical potential – for both reclamation and appropriation.

Previous scholarship on the subject of the freak and its relationship to the American literary canon is invested in reading the historical conditions through which the qualities of “freakishness” were produced and understood. Robert Bogdan’s 1990 genre study *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* asserts that “freak” is not a quality inherent to the person on display. Rather, it “is something that we created: a perspective, a set of practices – a social construction” (xi). Through performance artifacts, advertisements, cartes des visites, and interviews, Bogdan chronicles the construction of freakishness on the sideshow stage, but offers little information or speculation about the relationship between the freak and the audience.

In her 1997 study *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson argues that freak is “the necessary cultural complement to the acquisitive and capable American who claims the normative position of

masculine, white, nondisabled, sexually unambiguous, and middle class” (64). Thus, the freak makes the normative visible, as the material body provides a “seemingly irrefutable foundation” upon which to construct prevailing power relations (64). Garland-Thomson proposes that freak show audiences perceived the bodies they viewed in the sideshow tent as difference that legitimated their own normative positions. Where the freak possesses a “unique abnormality,” the “public” is “conceived as a featureless, uniform mass,” Rachel Adams notes in *Sideshow U.S.A.* (31). The lack of individuation amongst the spectators at the freak show indicates that a “public” must be devoid of particularity. Therefore, any bodies that assume too much specificity, especially where physical features are concerned in this case, are barred from participation in the “normate” public. Instead, the freak show as a genre enacts the “relationship in which exoticized disabled people and people of color functioned as physical opposites of the idealized American” (Garland-Thomson 64). The oppositional structures of normative spectator and freak performer built into the genre of the freak show cement the freak as an object for public consumption, a commodity whose bodily particularity assures its viewers of normalcy.

The freak, then, is a critical site through which to articulate the epistemological systems that establish bodily norms and govern public participation within the United States. By presenting “human oddities for amusement and profit,” as Bogdan’s subtitle states, freakishness is regulated to sideshows, museums, and other arenas of public spectacle. The physical separation of freaks from public life increases the power of their appearance within designated spaces for display, not only to assure the audience of their own normalcy, but to magnify why these types of bodies must be cut off from public life. This separation between freaks and spectators recalls Foucault’s biopower, the discursive disciplinary practices that regulate which bodies are allowed to fruitfully propagate, and which must not. What the existing scholarship on

freaks keenly points out is that late nineteenth century scientific discourses (especially anatomy, eugenics, anthropology, and biology) disseminate biopower as epistemology, and this framework of scientific regulation of bodies is key to the construction of the sideshow. Scientific discourse, therefore, functions as a technology of enfreakment and the freak itself becomes a biopolitical tool. It reminds spectators that they, the normate masses, can and should continue to live and thrive, while the non-normate freak can be allowed to die.

The freakish body, then, is inscribed as such through discourse. However, there is still quite clearly a material body, in multiple iterations, at the heart of these discursive constructions. In *Bodies That Matter*, Judith Butler argues that regulatory bodily norms (specifically with regards to sex and gender) function in “a performative fashion to constitute the materiality of bodies” (2). When subjects perform by assuming and appropriating bodily norms, this enables identification with normativity and denies and abjects alternative identifications. The abject subject, then, is constructed through “the force of exclusion and abjection” (3). Butler positions these abject(ed) subjects as a threat or disruption to the norm that can become a “critical resource” through which to “rearticulate the very terms of symbolic legitimacy and intelligibility” (3). What I draw from Butler and Foucault in context with existing work in freak studies is that the quality of freakishness is not only discursive, but performative. The material body of the freak is achieved through performativity, which reiterates discursive practices (and therefore naturalizes and crystallizes them), but also, critically, opens up the instabilities of the very constructions that create it (Butler 10).

My dissertation extends in these conversations by examining not only the cultural construction of freakishness, but the critical potential in performing freakishness. The existing scholarship largely focuses on the construction of freakishness in literary and performance

works, but is not necessarily invested in how freaks themselves may draw on these representational strategies to perform something other than the freak-normate binary. Each of the major works on the freak by Bogdan, Garland-Thomson, and Adams all “liberate” the freak in some way, primarily by acknowledging it as a social construction or a narrative identity claim. But it is notable that in the majority of studies on freaks within American literature and performance history, the analyses tend to be of cultural objects that are not created by persons once historically deemed freakish. Much scholarship on freaks does not come from first-hand narratives produced by sideshow performers, nor does it concentrate on contemporary deployments of freakishness made by persons of color, queer persons, women, or persons with disabilities. Rather, historical objects in these studies (i.e. pitch cards, photographs, and narratives surrounding historical freak show performers) are constructions of pitchmen, show runners, and photographers – most of whom were white, heterosexual, able-bodied men – rather than the performers themselves. While these historical freaks may have been somewhat complicit in the creation of their onstage acts, as Michael M. Chemers contends in *Staging Stigma: A Critical Examination of the American Freak Show*, they had little control – if any – over their representation offstage. As such, these studies do not engage with the potential to reclaim the “freak” in literary and performance works produced by formerly “enfreaked” communities. The emphasis on sideshow souvenirs, freak show advertising, and canonical literary works produced by normate writers denies the subjects of analysis the possibility for agency in their own representation, and can conversely replicate the freak-normate binary, rather than complicating it and “disidentifying” through self-representation.

By examining a combination of performance works, dramatic texts, and literature, my dissertation engages more fully with the range of “technologies of the self” through which

historically marginalized or “enfreaked” groups (as David Heavy would put it) articulate their identities. Both performance and writing are key self-representational strategies through which such populations can “disidentify” with hegemonic norms, as José Esteban Muñoz argues in *Disidentifications*. Muñoz suggests that these practices “transform a cultural logic from within” by working “on and against dominant ideology” (11). By viewing the “freak” as a heuristic for disidentification, in which subjects that employ this representational metaphor employ freakishness as a liminal state rather than an oppositional one, they begin to rework the cultural discourses about the limits of the self and the other. To view the freak as a mode of disidentification offers freakishness as a form of power for freaks themselves – whomever they may be (57).

An analysis of this type has not been possible thus far in “freak studies” because of the field’s emphasis on history. That is, with the exception of Rachel Adams’s chapters on *Beloved* and *Geek Love* in *Sideshow U.S.A.* and Leslie Fiedler’s *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self*, the most widely read works on the representational history of freaks does not consider the legacy of freak shows in postmodernity, concentrating instead on the nineteenth century (as Garland-Thomson and Chemers do) or on the appearance of freaks in literary modernism (as Thomas Fahy and Rachel Adams do). My project investigates the cultural currency of the freak within postmodernity, and argues for the centrality of freak images in contemporary American literary and cultural works by historically enfreaked groups. Where Thomas Fahy argues that freaks were salient metaphors for modernist writers because of their proximity to historical freak shows, I instead ask why many minority groups have returned to freakish figures and images in order to represent themselves in postmodern literature and culture. My methodology puts the history of the freak show in conversation with contemporary culture to answer this question.

Postmodernity may be defined in terms of its periodicity, as “stretching from the 1960s to the present, marked by such phenomena as upheavals in the international economic system, the Cold War and its decline, the increasing ethnic heterogeneity of the American population, the growth of the suburbs as a cultural force, the predominance of television as a cultural medium, and the rise of the computer” (Geyh et al. x). In “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” Jameson frames postmodernism not explicitly in terms of periodicity, but in terms of aesthetic features, which “emerge as specific reactions against the established forms of high modernism” and are reflective of the conditions of late capital (128). Though this definition of postmodernism keys in on the aesthetic practices of schizophrenia and pastiche, Jameson situates these aesthetic features as reactions to modernism and capitalism, a historicizing move which frames postmodernism’s effacement of “key boundaries or separations, most notably the erosion of the older distinction between high-culture and so-called mass or popular culture” (128). Linda Hutcheon promotes a different conceptualization of postmodernity, arguing that the “self-reflexive, parodic art” of the postmodern is an ironic formulation, a paradoxical “doubleness, or duplicity” that seeks to “de-naturalize some of the dominant features of our way of life” while acknowledging that both high art and mass media are “ideologically grounded, that they cannot avoid involvement with social and political relations and apparatuses” (1-3). Postmodernity’s paradoxical doubleness drives the return to freaks as a representational heuristic. The freak itself is a de-naturalizing site, one which questions the limits of self and other, high culture and low culture, and the nature of norms. Postmodern interest in freaks extends and revises the work of the freak within nineteenth century America and in early twentieth century modernist art. Cultural narratives about freaks in postmodernity are often crafted and produced by marginalized

subjects, transforming the freak into a heuristic through which images from the past become the symbols through which new public forms can be realized.

The primary claim of this dissertation, then, is that reclaiming the “freak” offers historically marginalized subjects the potential to disidentify with dominant (re: white, male, heteronormative) US culture. I argue that this self-enfreakment is achieved through a combination of rewriting and performing sideshow narratives and tropes. By engaging with and transforming these seemingly antiquated modes of representation, historically marginalized subjects can problematize and critique their own representational history. Contemporary “freaks” represent themselves not as the opposite of the norm, but actively employ freakishness to disidentify with the freak-normate binary and transform these exclusionary cultural logics from within, thereby expanding the knowable limits of public life. However, the pleasures in disrupting the freak-normate binary are also sometimes perilous. Because the freak show as a genre hinges on the ironic tension between the fundamentally American qualities of exceptional individualism and pluralist diversity symbolized by the mass of bodies – both freakish and normate – congregating under the big top, the freak itself is an ambivalent construction. Postmodernity’s nostalgic embrace of the freak show has opened up the critical possibility for reclamation by formerly marginalized groups, but also for its appropriation by the very “norms” against which it is defined. My project explores both the possibility for a “freaktopia” and its limitations within postmodernity, arguing that the freak permits the powerful possibility to forge new concepts of public life, while simultaneously upholding dominant normate forms.

I begin by exploring “Siamese Twins and Contemporary Queer Fiction.” The double body of the Siamese twin has fascinated Americans since Chang & Eng, the eponymous Siamese twins, debuted in the United States in the 1830s. Their image of two young men in such close

proximity raised questions about the nature of personhood, as well as sexuality and sexual practice. In a sense, the Siamese twin is a decidedly queer figure, as the material reality of a body like Chang & Eng's makes it impossible for any sex act in which either twin participated to be purely heteronormative. Thus, it does not strike me as unintentional that Siamese twins (or Siamese twin-like configurations) appear central to contemporary queer fiction, specifically Shelley Jackson's 2006 science fiction novel *Half-Life* and John Cameron Mitchell's 2001 rock musical *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*. In each of these texts, I close read the employment of "Siamystic" imagery and explicate how these images "perform" the work of disidentification (Jackson 45).

This chapter broadly argues that the use of freakish imagery, particularly that of the Siamese twin, is an analytic through which queer literary and performance texts "disidentify" with normative heterosexuality. Here I draw on Muñoz's notion of queer writing and performance as a "technology of the self" through which identification can occur, and his related claim that through performance marginalized subjects can work on and through the texts they perform (which are frequently not of their own authoring) to "remak[e] and rewrit[e] a dominant script" (Muñoz 23). It is in this space of performance that Muñoz claims political and cultural work can be done.

I suggest in this chapter that the Siamese twin trope is taken up as such a "technology of the self" in contemporary queer narratives because it poses historically-grounded questions about the nature of identity itself. I build this argument by first providing a history of how famous Siamese twins like Chang and Eng Bunker were used to problematize issues of personhood and national belonging in American historical narratives. This history comprises literary texts, artifacts, and criticism on the Bunker twins, particularly Mark Twain's "The Personal Habits of

Siamese Twins” and Alison Pingree’s “America’s United Siamese Brothers.” I put these historical narratives in conversation with close readings of Mitchell and Jackson’s contemporary works to demonstrate how queer writers and performers draw on the Siamese twin as a representative trope in order to question the notion of personal identity, and transform it into a heuristic for disidentifying. By positioning queer characters as “siamystic,” these writers create a space that resists both hegemonic norms and their counter-identifications, crafting queer worlds through symbols formerly aligned with nationalism.

By taking up the representational power of the freak, historically marginalized groups leverage this symbolic power to transform public space itself. My second chapter, “Feminist Freaks: Performing Gender, Producing the Public in *Signs of Life* and *Geek Love*,” builds on Mary Russo’s foundational text, *The Female Grotesque*, in which she argues that the feminine itself is grotesque as the female body is always already transgressing norms or provoking the dangers of that transgression (12). Russo’s work specifically engages with female “performers,” both literary and historical, among them Amelia Earhart, circus aerialists, actresses, photographers, and performance artists. Russo’s emphasis on female performers locates the grotesque in sites of performance -- a comingling of aesthetics and action that undoes “radical negation, silence, withdrawal, and invisibility” -- and affords “a cultural politics for women” (54). Russo, in concert with most literary scholarship, aligns these grotesque qualities with modernity. I extend Russo’s understanding of the grotesque as a site of performance and cultural production to its closely-related cousin, “the freakish,” a term that, in spite of its historical genesis in the nineteenth century, tracks onto the postmodern. I propose here that what Russo dubs the grotesque female body is what marks the feminine as freakish.

In this chapter, I explore the sideshow's promulgation of scientific understandings of women's sexuality as freakish or deviant, and how these paradigms are leveraged as critical feminist tools in post-WWII women's writing and performance. I argue, broadly, that works by women during this time period actively engaged with the idea of female bodies and sexuality as "freakish," and used this aesthetic as a feminist practice. Highlighting their freakish sexuality in these interactions renders female performers from passive objects of the male gaze into active subjects that control their own "to-be-looked-at-ness" (Mulvey 10). By exhibiting themselves (and their bodies) on stage in exaggerated spectacles of femininity, women are effectively able to "rewrite" themselves as narrative subjects, and lay claim to their sexuality and bodies through writing and performance, often through the incorporation of displays of nudity.

I begin this chapter with an analysis of the role of the actress, Mrs. Kendall, in Bernard Pomerance's 1979 play, *The Elephant Man*, and the text's intentional positioning of the actress against John Merrick, The Elephant Man, then, I turn to Joan Schenkar's play *Signs of Life*, which rewrites the story of the Elephant Man with a female protagonist. By engaging with the position of female performers (both freaks and proper stage actresses) within these plays, I illuminate the ways in which female performance itself is constructed as freakish and transgressive, and the role that performance itself plays in negotiating this construction.

Both plays offer extended scenes in which the audience gazes at the body of the female freak (or the actor-freak), typically in a state of nude or semi-nude display. Rather than replicating the dynamics of the male gaze, the explicit and controlled display of female nudity in these exchanges subverts the gaze and allows women to rewrite their freakishness as power to recreate and reclaim public space. I build this argument by situating the conversation about actresses and freaks alongside the historical presentation of women's bodies within the sideshow,

which often presented freakishness as nudity or semi-nudity, and utilize this historical context to motivate my close readings of the role of striptease in *Geek Love*, which demonstrate how these postmodern works reclaim the freakishness of the female body by stripping it down

I build upon my discussion of the visible body as a tool for making new public forms in my third chapter, “Visualizing Disability: Mat Fraser and the Staging of Radical Difference.” Within the field of disability studies, the scholarship on freak shows runs the gamut from endorsements of the freak show as a powerful venue for persons with disabilities to participate in economic production to critiques of the freak show’s structures of exploitation. Some scholars argue that the freak show itself was complicit in constructing persons with disabilities as “less than” their able-bodied counterparts. By putting the person with a disability in the position to be looked as “Other,” the freak show simply replicates the power dynamics of an already ableist world. However, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s *Extraordinary Bodies* suggests that the freak show was less damaging to persons with disabilities than it may seem. Garland-Thomson argues that staring is distinct from the gaze “which has been extensively defined as an oppressive act of disciplinary looking that subordinates its victim” because it instead is a “dynamic struggle” between starrer and staree that involves engagement and response from both parties (9, 3). Her construction suggests that the dynamics of staring can be a confrontation that renegotiates the traditional power structure established between spectators and spectacle. Garland-Thomson’s distinction between staring and gazing offers historically “othered” subjects such as those who once performed in the freak show the benefit of agency within their own representation. Her citation of the freak show as a place that invites stares suggests that by broadening the public’s exposure to anomalous bodies, the cultural work of the freak show also increases public understanding, acceptance, and engagement with persons with disabilities.

It is in the context of staring as mutual engagement that I approach the use of freak show imagery and freakish bodies by writers and performers with disabilities. I extend Garland-Thomson's argument about the dynamics of staring by claiming that actively inviting spectators to stare at disabled bodies in a freak show-like context reclaims and rewrites the history of the freak as participatory, thus countering ableist ways of viewing and understanding the disabled body as anti-normative. Instead, by highlighting and addressing freakishness rather than medical objectivity, writers and performers with disabilities critique the norm without conforming to it. In this chapter, I focus on the works of actor/writer/performance artist Mat Fraser. Through an analysis of his play *Seal-Boy Freak* and his virtuoso striptease performance "The Arms," I argue that Fraser's work encourages audiences to stare at his disabled body in ways that counter ableist norms, particularly regarding Fraser's ability to "work" as a performer/actor and his sexual viability as a man with phocomelia.

My final chapter, "Postmodern Freak Shows: An *American Horror Story*," tracks the neo-sideshow movement alongside the marked appearance of freaks in postmodern cultural texts. While scholars such as Robyn Blyn, Thomas Fahy, and Rachel Adams concentrate primarily on modernist texts and the freak show, my project seeks to deepen and extend the range of "freak studies" texts about postmodernity, where the appearance of freaks as literary and cultural figures has persisted even as the historical freak show itself has disappeared from the cultural landscape. This chapter posits that the lasting power of the freak is made possible by the countercultural interest in freak shows, as Leslie Fiedler contends in *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self*, but also warns that "nobody can write about Freaks without exploiting them for his own ends" (171). This chapter concerns the counterculture's exploitation of freaks, arguing that the movement's investment in reviving the freak show as symbolic of anti-consumer

and anti-normate attitudes has also endangered the genre's salvific potential for historically "enfreaked" persons. The rise of the neo-sideshow movement, in tandem with the counterculture's identification with freaks, constructs the freak show as a utopic space of diversity, held in ironic tension with exceptional individualism. These dual tenets of the "freaktopia" reflect the counterculture's need to create public spaces that defy white, middle-class, heteropatriarchal capital. However, the resulting spaces of neo-sideshow are overwhelmingly white and male, disrupting the genre's claims to exceptional individualism and diversity.

Through my analysis of the neo-sideshow movement and the narrative use of the freak show on the recent FX television series *American Horror Story: Freak Show*, I argue that the freak show's key tensions between exceptional individualism and infinite plurality allow for the possibility of a "freaktopia" for historically enfreaked individuals, but also engender the genre's appropriation by the very norms against which it is positioned. The appropriation of the freak show in service of white, middle-class, heteropatriarchal capitalism illustrates that while the freak itself may have the potential for reclamation, the freak show as genre represents a more ambivalent position to reclamation in postmodernity.

**CHAPTER ONE:****THE SIAMESE TWIN & CONTEMPORARY QUEER FICTION**

“One face, one voice, one habit, and two persons;  
A natural perspective, that is, and is not!”

--William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night* (V.i.192-193)

The Siamese twin has occupied the American cultural imagination since Chang & Eng, the conjoined twins from Thailand from whom the colloquial eponym is drawn, began exhibiting themselves in the U.S. in the pre-Civil War era. The story of the brothers has been recounted numerous times, both in literary and biographical instances. Leslie Fielder’s account of the twins from 1978 in *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self* focuses on the question of personhood, asserting that the twins regarded themselves as “a single person” because they chose to sign “legal documents and personal correspondence not as Chang and Eng, but simply Chang Eng” (213). That same year, Irving and Amy Wallace’s biography *The Two: The Story of the Original Siamese Twins* dwells less on the philosophical question the twins posed and more on the details of their everyday life, culling together an extensive archive of correspondence, tax records, deeds of sale, and so on. Darrin Strauss’s 2001 novel takes a literary approach to telling the story of Chang & Eng, offering both brothers’ perspectives on their shared lives in alternating

chapters. Strauss's novel is the first literary account of Chang & Eng since the nineteenth century, where they captured the attention of Mark Twain.

Twain's humorous essay, "The Personal Habits of Siamese Twins," describes the brothers as having such opposite personalities that many of their life activities appear to be impossibly contentious. However, in spite of this they "live in perfect accord" because of the "bond between them which made them unwilling to go away from each other" (249). The comedy of Twain's essay arises from his description of the twins' routines, including the hilarious impossibility that although the twins "always go to bed at the same time . . . Chang usually gets up about an hour before his brother" (249). The humor of the image stems from the ambiguity of meaning. While it is completely possible for Chang to wake up an hour before Eng and lie in bed, thinking, it is impossible for him to "get up" from bed while his brother is still asleep. Although "get up" and "wake up" are synonyms, Twain employs the more active of the two constructions. "Get up" conjures the image of a grown man, Chang Bunker, lugging his conjoined sleeping brother in tow as he goes about his morning routine. No doubt, Chang getting up from bed would wake up Eng, making the aforementioned image both improbable and impractical. Likewise, Twain's essay suggests further contentious impossibilities, most notably: "During the War they were strong partisans, and both fought gallantly all through the great struggle – Eng on the Union Side and Chang on the Confederate" (249). This image from Twain's essay is perhaps the most impossible of all. It suggests the Bunker twins standing against each other in battle, perhaps literally on opposite sides of the Mason-Dixon line, one clad in Union grays, the other in Confederate blues – all while connected by a semi-rigid band of flesh protruding from their abdomens. While most of the opposition between the twins in Twain's essay points to semantic quarrels and linguistic confusion, the depiction of the Bunker

twins' involvement in the American Civil War offers an ideological incompatibility lodged within a single, unified body.

In her analysis of the real-life Bunker twins' marketing materials from their sideshow days, Allison Pingree notes that the "twins were packaged as one unit, blurred into one set of tastes, thoughts, and impulses – therein offering to the American audience the impulse to confirm its own natural cohesion" (100). Pingree's essay draws its title from one of the Bunker's Civil War-era promotional pamphlets: "America's United Siamese Brothers." Such pamphlets, Pingree offers, demonstrated Chang and Eng as a harmonious union of potentially disparate likes and dislikes, much like the nation in which they were being exhibited. Indeed, the rhetorical construction of the pamphlet's title makes clear that there is a relationship between the Bunker twins' united body and the United States itself.

In her 2011 monograph *Reading Embodied Citizenship*, Emily Russell extends this reading in her analysis of Twain's other Siamese twin-laden texts: *Pudd'nhead Wilson* and its companion novel *Those Extraordinary Twins*. Through extensive close reading of these texts, Russell foregrounds "how Twain's essay re-envision[s] personal traits as national models, moving between the intimate body and the national body" (27). Twain's employment of the Siamese twin as synecdochal for the national body is clearly not limited only to the two novels Russell examines, but also to his shorter sketch, "The Personal Habits of Siamese Twins." In all three texts, the personal is political as the anomalous body of the Siamese twins at the heart of the narrative becomes the body through which the nation is imagined.

Twain's image of Chang and Eng fighting on opposite ideological sides of the Civil War uses the twin's double body to illustrate the nation at war with itself. Twain's employment of the

Bunker twins demonstrates both the harm a body at war with itself can do, and simultaneously posits the twin's conjoined body as an ideal resolution to that very conflict. As Russell suggests:

“Their connection to each other functions as the ideal contrast to a nation at war with itself. Instead of the conventions of the literary grotesque in which the disabled body serves as a mark of chaos in the world, Twain uses Chang and Eng as a metaphor for a proper national body. In Twain's imaginative revision, the freakish body is no longer the conjoined twins, but instead the U.S. body with ‘its quarrelings, its wranglings, and its separation of brothers.’” (28)

The end of Twain's essay turns away from conflict and moves toward defining the high moral principles the brothers' share. “The sympathy existing between these two brothers is so close and so refined that the feelings, the impulses, the emotions of the one are instantly experienced by the other,” Twain writes (252). Their sympathetic connection, facilitated by the semi-rigid band of flesh connecting their torsos, becomes a valued trait that Twain calls a warning with a “solemn moral” or a “solemn warning” with a moral in it, for through this the twins save each other time and time again from jail, illness, and immoral behavior within the short span of Twain's text (253).

In Russell's reading of Twain's work, the very problem that Chang and Eng highlight (of a national body at war with itself) is resolved in the twins' ultimate fidelity to each other that their physical embodiment demands. Their “fidelity and mutual affection” for one another become “the very qualities that elect them as the embodiment of the nation” (28). Thus, Chang and Eng become precisely what their old press kits and Pingree's essay suggest they are: “America's United Siamese Brothers.” They are not only united in body, but an ideal body through which to express a national yearning for unity that is distinctly American.

Russell further theorizes that the “metaphorical correspondence between physical bodies and the body politic creates effects in which each impacts the other in the national imagination” (26). This is to say that the literary uses of bodies like Chang and Eng’s double body not only tell readers how they might, as Pingree suggests, learn to see the national body as “united” in spite of internal ideological conflict, but can also form a metonymic relationship in which the nation establishes parameters through which ideal bodies are formed.

The relationship between the national and the bodily contained in Siamese twin narratives does not usually focus, however, on the civic participation of its twinned subjects. Instead, the narrative focus tends to be on the home life of Siamese twins. This is true in Twains stories about Chang & Eng and other Siamese twins, as well as in their real-life press coverage. The focus on narrativizing the “personal habits” of Siamese twins persists in media coverage of vaudeville stars Daisy & Violet Hilton, the singing, dancing, saxophone playing sisters who were popular nearly 60 years after the height of the Bunker twins’ fame – and who were joined at the hip.

In both the Bunker brothers and Hilton sisters’ public narratives, their marriage prospects feature heavily. In “The ‘Exceptions that Prove the Rule:’ Daisy and Violet Hilton, the ‘New Woman,’ and the Bonds of Marriage”, Allison Pingree continues her inquiry into the domestic lives of America’s most famous sets of conjoined twins. She argues that the closeness of the sisters presented a challenge to the dominant model of “companionate marriage,” in which both male and female partners married as friends under relative domestic equality. In a culture where same-sex friendships were being formed among women in the workplace, at political gatherings and in other public spaces, the doubly female body of Daisy & Violet was emblematic of the New Woman that arose in those spaces. “They were women joined together, seemingly happy without men, just as the New Woman was with her feminist sisters,” Pingree writes. “Indeed, the

twins had the potential to be seen in the same way that Smith-Rosenberg describes the New Woman, as a ‘condensed symbol of disorder and rebellion’” (“Exceptions” 177). Pingree also points out how dangerous Daisy & Violet’s indelible connection was to the notion of nation heterosexuality itself, as their bond “rendered unnecessary” the companionate “heterosexual spouse” (“Exceptions” 177).

Like their twentieth century counterparts, Daisy & Violet Hilton, Chang & Eng Bunker’s conjoined body represented nineteenth century ideologies of domestic life. Pingree notes that the twins were considered “an attractive illustration of the fantasy of finding one’s ‘other half’ in romance and marriage,” but that the great irony of this reception of the twins was that their own marriages “posed a severe challenge to those same norms, because they were all too literally each other’s ‘other half’” (“United” 103). Chang & Eng’s domestic arrangements are well-documented in both Darin Strauss’s historical fiction account of the twins’ lives, as well as in Irving and Amy Wallace’s thorough biography of the brothers, *The Two*. Both Strauss and the Wallaces narrate the twins’ marriages to the Yates sisters, and document their living arrangements. Chang & Eng owned separate houses (with separate property taxes, domestic staff, and slaves), in which each of their wives resided. Chang’s wife Adelaide oversaw one household, while Eng’s wife Sarah Anne oversaw the other. Because the brothers were conjoined, they spent a few nights of the week in each household so that the conjugal duties of their marriages could be fulfilled. Though the brothers’ fidelity to one another and perfect union represented what an ideal marital union should be, the arrangements of their own marriages troubled this. As Pingree puts it, the domestic lives of the original Siamese twins transgressed the ideologies of Victorian America through the spectre of “homosexuality (because both were

male), incest (because they were brothers), and adultery (because each would, in a sense, be sleeping with a woman not his wife)” (“United” 105).

Dean Jensen’s biography of the Hilton sisters, *The Lives and Loves of Daisy and Violet Hilton: A True Story of Conjoined Twins*, details Daisy & Violet’s various affairs, broken engagements, and failed marriages in great detail. Jensen’s book constructs Daisy & Violet’s adult lives through their attempts at courtship, with evidence drawn from their own memoir, newspaper clippings, as well as reminiscences of friends and acquaintances. The biography’s emphasis on the romantic entanglements of the Hilton sisters stands as a testament to the continued public fascination with the sex lives of conjoined twins. Although each sister married once, and quickly divorced thereafter, the more interesting story lies in the number of failed or broken engagements involving the Hilton sisters.

Though many of the Hilton sisters’ courtships never even made it as far as the courthouse, when Violet Hilton applied for a marriage license to wed bandleader Maurice Lambert in 1934, she was denied by the State of New York “on the ground that the bride is a Siamese twin” (Jensen 245). Although city counsel William C. Chanler “conceded that there was nothing in the city’s code that would prevent a Siamese twin from marrying . . . the city clerk had discretionary powers in the granting of licenses.” Chanler himself supported the decision to deny the permit, calling the idea of marriage to a Siamese twin “quite immoral and indecent” and that the city “will not be a party to such an affair” (Jensen 245). Violet and Maurice applied again in Newark, New Jersey, only to be denied again on the same grounds as in New York. They tried again in Maryland, and were once again denied.

Violet Hilton filed a suit with the city of New York, hiring Irving Levy to plead her case. Levy argued that Violet was blatantly being denied a right that would have been afforded to any

other woman “because of an accident of birth” and that the city clerk’s ruling was arbitrary, and unduly imposed “an unnatural and immoral burden” upon Violet and, by extension, her sister Daisy (Jensen 251). The city claimed that they could not grant a marriage license to Violet because “it would mean that the city was sanctioning a situation in which a third person would be present during the most intimate moments of a couple’s married life” (252). The state supreme court of New York ruled that the city clerk’s office “had acted within the law” in rejecting Maurice Lambert and Violet Hilton’s application for a marriage license (252).

Jensen’s account of Violet’s pursuit of a marriage license reveals that the possibility of marriage for a Siamese twin in the 1930s was troubled by the same ideological problems raised by Chang & Eng in the 1860s. The supreme court of the state of New York’s ruling against Violet Hilton and Maurice Lambert indicates chiefly that their sex lives would, by necessity, operate counter to the strictly heterosexual, couple-based understanding of marital relations as defined by the laws of the state of New York. Although Daisy Hilton testified that she was in full support of her sister’s happiness and wouldn’t in any way impede in her sister’s relationship, the state supposed that her visceral attachment to her sister would do the opposite, effectively inserting Daisy Hilton into the sex life of her sister Violet and her husband. This would turn Maurice Lambert into a bigamist, render Daisy & Violet Hilton incestuous, and transform their sisterly bond into a homoerotic one. The state’s rejection of Violet Hilton’s application to marry Maurice Lambert is framed primarily in terms of bigamy and incest, sublimating the erotic intimacy the two women may have shared and obscuring the queer potential of their double body.

Pingree’s article on Daisy & Violet’s marriage prospects also notably neglects any spectres of queer intimacy suggested by Daisy and Violet’s conjoined body, yet her readings of

the sisters' performances in Tod Browning's *Freaks* are dominated by queer acts. Pingree chooses to focus, for instance, on a scene of Daisy closing her eyes to revel in the mutual sensation of her sister Violet kissing her husband, which seems as though she is also receiving a kiss from her sister. Pingree assumes "[s]uch a sequence serves, once again, to reveal the frightening prospects that the twins pose – prospects such as women sharing simultaneous sensual enjoyment, or husbands unable to control altogether when, where, and how their wives experience sexuality" ("Exceptions" 182). Pingree's description of the scene from suggests that Daisy is relishing "the erotic pleasure right along with her sister," and in *Freaks* doing so ignores the queerness of the act. By constructing the kiss as something which provides simultaneous pleasure, Pingree denies Daisy and Violet the mutual pleasure of experiencing one another's bodies. By choosing to read this scene as evidence of their sisterly bonds and companionship and feminist sentiments, rather than a non-heteronormative form of sexual pleasure, Pingree's reading of Daisy & Violet Hilton obscures queer embodiment from being a part of national domestic culture. She ignores, too, Daisy's husband, Roscoe, who is a transvestite with a significant stutter. Pingree concentrates on Violet's bossy attitude toward Roscoe as an assertion of the threat of the New Woman, but misses Roscoe's own queerness as threat to white, heteronormative masculinity.

But while it misses queer readings of Siamese twins, Pingree's concentration on marriage and domestic forms in her studies of both Chang & Eng and Daisy & Violet ultimately reveals that the domestic fantasy represented by Siamese twins is founded on national heterosexuality. Although *Freaks* clearly shows Daisy & Violet's doubly female body as a threat to marriage itself, it is notably the only narrative featuring the Hilton twins, either real or fictional, in which both sisters do wind up married – and seemingly happily at that. As each sister seems not only to

take pleasure in her partner, but also in her sister's pleasure, the Hilton twins' domestic arrangements in Browning's *Freaks* point to a notably queer reconfiguration of national heterosexuality, operating within its own legal parameters.

What's also notable about the Bunker twins' marriage to the Yates sisters often sits as a footnote in the Strauss and Wallace accounts of their lives: their marriages made them naturalized American citizens. Therefore, by choosing to enter into domestic arrangements, however queer those may have been due to the Bunker's conjoined bodies, they also became *domesticated* in the legal sense. By getting married, the twins earned citizenship, providing them with full participation in the national body. In marrying Adelaide and Sarah Anne Yates, Chang and Eng Bunker were no longer anomalous bodies that metaphorically represented the national body, but also members of the national body itself. In *Reading Embodied Citizenship*, Russell defines "domestication" as a function of the process figures like the Bunker twins undergo through their figurative associations with the nation. Russell argues that anomalous bodies either "manage or are managed by the social body" via domestication. Domesticating the freakish body of the conjoined twin, she argues, produces a "destabilizing effect, asking citizens to reconsider the legacy of the nation's foundational assumptions and to press the logics of individualism and American exceptionalism to their limits" (26). Russell's commentary suggests that by incorporating exceptional bodies like those of Chang & Eng or Daisy & Violet as not just national metaphors, but national bodies reworks the logics of individualism and exceptionalism upon which America is founded. The presence of Siamese twins as symbolic national types highlights the truly exceptional, which stands at odds with American egalitarian ideologies. Narratives about the domestic lives of Siamese twins point out the foundational inequities upon which national participation is based. They demonstrate that the national presupposes

heterosexual marriage as an entry point to proper participation, and simultaneously show how anomalous bodies must rework this prerequisite for national domesticity from the inside.

It is with these literary-historical linkages of Siamese twins, domestic life, and the nation in mind that I turn toward an examination of contemporary fictional narratives that incorporate Siamese twins and Siamese twin-like figures. Outside of Darrin Strauss's fictionalized history, *Chang & Eng*, the double body of the Siamese twin makes its most salient appearances in contemporary queer fictions. The protagonists of Shelley Jackson's 2006 novel *Half Life* are conjoined twins, Nora and Blanche Olney, one of whom is a queer femme sex worker who worries about what her lovers are thinking about her comatose twin sister while they're in bed with her. John Cameron Mitchell's 2001 stage play and film *Hedwig & the Angry Inch* relies on the fiction of the "other half" and the search for a twin-like lover as the driving narrative force, employing throughout imagery of anomalous bodies both in its language and staging that are in many ways conjoined.

In my close reading of these texts, I explore the queering of the Siamese twin and its relationship to domesticity and national participation. I argue that conjoined twins in contemporary queer narratives maintain their figurative resonance with national participation, but do so by reworking domesticity. Where marriage and domestic concerns attempted to regulate the queer sexual lives of Siamese twins in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, contemporary queer texts instead use these anomalous bodies as synecdoches for queer worlds that intentionally disidentify with heteronormative structures of national participation. That is, the presence of conjoined bodies in contemporary queer texts takes up and transforms the problems these anomalous bodies posed for nineteenth and early twentieth-century

understandings of the national body, and articulates a new kind of domestic participation for queer bodies.

I read these texts primarily through the lens of queer theory and performance theory, with a heavy emphasis on the works of José Esteban Muñoz. This chapter puts Muñoz in conversation with work by Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner to establish the links between queer bodies and the performance of national participation: drawing upon Muñoz's theories of self-performance and authorship and Lee Edelman's deconstruction of normative masculinity, it destabilizes the demarcation of identities and attendant valuations. By reading queer theory and performance theory alongside these images of conjoined twins, I illustrate the queer history of the Siamese twin, and argue for its centrality to queer embodiment in contemporary literature.

In "Sex in Public," Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner critique national heterosexuality as a "space of pure citizenship." In particular, they argue heterosexuality is "the mechanism by which a core national culture can be imagined" because it replicates the "familial model of society," in which private, personal life is separate from public life, but is also simultaneously the precondition for participating in the public sphere (549). This model simultaneously "displaces the recognition of structural racism and other systemic inequalities" by "separating the aspirations of national belonging from the critical culture of the public sphere and from political citizenship" (550). Berlant and Warner's account of the separation of private intimacy from public life makes clear that citizenship privileges only models of intimacy that are reproductive in nature due to the link between family and privacy. In other words, heterosexuality is imagined as that which propagates the nation and organizes domestic life. It is the "privileged institution of social reproduction, the accumulation and transfer of capital, and self-development" (553).

Berlant and Warner's essay hones in on the regulation of sexuality within the heteronormative public sphere. They contend that the separation of life into public and private spheres is key to barring any public life based on sex: "[B]y making sex seem irrelevant or merely personal, heteronormative conventions of intimacy block the building of non-normative or explicitly public sexual cultures" (553). What Berlant and Warner's analysis of the privatization of sexual life points out is the propagation and futurity of the nation is imagined through the model of generative reproduction, rather than a model of community. This reading reimagines Benedict Anderson's concept of nationalism as imagined community, which, though it deals with many types of kinship and comradeship, fails to consider intimacy as a part of communal imagining. "Community is imagined through scenes of intimacy, coupling, kinship," Berlant and Warner note, which is distinct from a "historical relation to futurity" which is instead "restricted to generational narrative and reproduction" (554).

The very exclusion of non-normative sexualities from national belonging enables creative understandings of public life that differ from the familial model of nationalism. Berlant and Warner refer to these re-imaginings of public life and public space as "queer world[s]," and these worlds are built on "forms of intimacy that bear no necessary relation to domestic space, to the couple form, to kinship, to property, or to the nation" (558). These spaces and types of relationships are built from queer intimacies and brought over into public life as means of organizing the social structure of queer worlds. They defy the privatization of intimacy that national heterosexuality demands, and instead construct "border intimacies" in which queer intimacies spill over into public life (560). These border intimacies are a key part of crafting queer counterpublics within the dominant national imagination.

One way in which these border intimacies can be imagined is through the body of the conjoined twin. As Berlant and Elizabeth Freeman note in “Queer Nationality,” during the 1967 congressional hearings concerning “security clearance of gay men for service in the Defense Department, a psychiatrist named Dr. Charles Socarides testified that the homosexual ‘does not know the boundary of his own body . . . He does not know where his body ends and space begins’” (155). Socarides comments suggest that unbounded queerness is a problem for national security because it transgresses its own bodily borders, and it is this type of border intimacy that also carries with it the potential to “spill over into public life.” The linguistic construction of homosexuality as that which does not know the boundary of its own body recalls the similarly borderless bodies of conjoined twins. The individual bodies of conjoined twins spill over into one another, creating a boundary confusion which is simultaneously threatening to the ideology of American individualism and symbolic of the drive for national unity. Conjoined bodies are inherently queer bodies, and the border intimacy of these bodies is taken up in contemporary queer fiction as a hermeneutic for bringing queer intimacy into public life. Siamese twins both real and metaphoric become the foundations upon which queer worlds are built, shifting the symbolic use of the conjoined twin away from its nineteenth century significance to national heterosexuality and toward queer utopic possibilities.

Shelley Jackson’s 2006 novel *Half Life* narrates the clash between queer counterpublics and national heterosexuality through its Siamese twin protagonists. The novel’s quasi-science fiction premise imagines a world in which nuclear fallout has led to a rise in births of dicephalic conjoined twins, who make up a very visible minority. These conjoined twin subjects are known as “Twofer,” a somewhat pejorative term that marks them as a distinct cultural alternative to the “Singleton” masses. Jackson’s work draws clear parallels between the Twofer population and

queer culture: San Francisco's Castro district is a Twofers mecca, Twofers are barred from certain legal rights, and their allies are considered to be "twin hags" or "twofer-identified" (19). Twofers are sometimes discriminated against by Singletons on the basis of their appearance, as when Blanche and Nora Olney are unable to rent a room in a community house because the current tenants "didn't want couple energy in the house, and they felt they should stick to that even if the couple only had one body" (17).

Nora, who narrates the novel while her non compos mentis twin "sleeps," admits that the reliance on coupling is a problem. "[C]ouples are always monstrous," she says. "Everyone senses this and grows uneasy in their company. Nobody likes to watch the blending of things that should be separate: a sea urchin making up to a buffalo, a mosquito fondling a worm" (63). Nora's monstrous imagery in the description of the Twofers body reconfigures the very state of coupling as monstrous. To be Twofers, it suggests, is to be in-between states and to be consistently in flux. However, Nora's description of monstrous couplings is also a pointed critique of national heterosexuality. Although she states that coupling (presumably of any kind) is always monstrous, it is specifically the "blending of things that should be separate" that she depicts as problematic. Pairings of things that are the same (like conjoined twins or queer lovers) are less monstrous than the pairing of bodies that are different. The "sea urchin making up to a buffalo" and the "mosquito fondling a worm" are grotesque in Nora's eyes because the images focus on the pairing, rather than the individual actions. Nora goes on to wonder: "Why would two people who are free to walk away stand side by side and even hold hands? If I were single, I would always walk away. I would specialize in it" (63). While her comments are ostensibly in reference to the burden of going about the world attached to a comatose twin who sleeps on her shoulder, Nora's critique of the matrix of coupledness presses upon the nation's own monstrous

coupling of the logic of American individualism and national heterosexuality. Like the sea urchin making up to the buffalo, these two ideological viewpoints are seemingly incongruous, and yet are in coupled in the makeup of citizenship.

By questioning why Singletons would willingly participate in such a logical inconsistency, Nora critiques the ideology at its core. Her commentary on the monstrosity of the couple form points out couple forms usurp individuality, both metaphorically and legally through the matrix of national heterosexuality. That Nora is one half of a pair of Siamese twins obviously complicates the construction further. It is impossible for Nora or her sister Blanche to participate as full citizens because although they are a couple, their coupling is not heterosexual. Any romantic partners they should acquire, whether queer (for Nora) or straight (for Blanche) would change the formation of coupledness itself into something unrecognizable or permissible under national heterosexuality. *Half Life* offers its Twofers population as a critique of this incongruous ideological coupling. By supposing alternatives to national heterosexuality through the Twofers populations' quest for civil liberties, the novel offers the Siamese twin as a heuristic for critique and a metaphor for the making of queer worlds.

The narrative of *Half Life* is interspersed with pages from Nora's own composition: The Siamese Twin Reference Manual, a cross between a textbook that documents the history of Siamese twins and a scrapbook of objects relating to conjoined contemporaries of Nora and Blanche. Some of the items in the Siamese Twin Reference Manual are: a weekly column in the San Francisco Chronicle called "One Twofers' View," a list of books about Siamese Twins on sale at Twice Blessed Books, policy statements from The League of Mutant Voters, excerpts from online discussion boards dedicated to twin-removal fantasies for Twofers, products for Siamese Twins from the Delta Skymall Catalogue, and lyrics to Daisy and Violet Hilton's

popular vaudeville song “Me Too! Ho-Ho! Ha-Ha!” among other items (47-48, 81, 111-112, 151, 28). A press release for the “6<sup>th</sup> Annual Twofer Pride March and Festival” encourages participants (both Twofer and Singleton) to “Volunteer! . . . Take a class! . . . Donate!” as a way of getting involved with the Twofer cause (37). What these items suggest is that Siamese Twins within the world of the novel operate as ways of reimagining public space and creating a Twofer version of a queer world that has its own politics, history, and popular culture.

The Siamese Twin Reference Manual contains a press release for the “6<sup>th</sup> Annual Twofer Pride Film Festival,” which shows fictional films like the “lesbian kickboxing romantic comedy *One Two Punch!*” alongside “those older movies you love to hate and hate to love, including *Freaks, Sisters, Twins, Despair, Dead Ringers, The Dark Mirror, The Man in the Iron Mask, The Prince and the Pauper, The Double Life of Veronique, A Zed and Two Noughts, Twin Falls Idaho, The City of Lost Children, The Bride with the White Hair, Twelfth Night, A Comedy of Errors, How to Get a Head in Advertising, On the Double, The Corsican Brothers, Basket Case, Blood Link, Dark Seed II, and Chained for Life*” (23). The film festival itself offers an opportunity for Twofers and allies to identify, communicate, and share experiences with one another in a public space. This space operates counter to a mainstream film festival, instead choosing to specifically focus on films about both conjoined and non-conjoined twins (including two films starring Daisy & Violet Hilton: *Freaks* and *Chained for Life*). The Twofer film festival obviously parallels LGBT film festivals, which make queer worlds of mainstream movie theatres for the duration of the festival. In addition to creating inclusive public spaces, film festivals like these also create public spaces organized around the visibility of queer sex acts. By showing queer romances on screens, sex (and the witnessing thereof) becomes a public act, rather than a private one. The Twofer Film Festival does this also by screening the films of the Hilton Sisters

and the “lesbian kickboxing romantic comedy.” As previously discussed, *Freaks* cleverly alludes to the queer sex lives of Siamese twins in the scene where Violet reacts to Daisy kissing her husband, while *Chained for Life* turns the sisters’ real-life legal troubles surrounding marriage into a courtroom drama about the trial of Vivian Hamilton (Violet Hilton) for the murder of Dorothy Hamilton’s (Daisy Hilton) husband.<sup>1</sup> The narrative content of these films clearly makes sex public, especially by inserting queer stories into the typically heterosexual genre of the romantic comedy. A film like *One Two Punch!*, although fictional, speaks to the critical power of art and entertainment mediums as a component of queer world-building.

However, the power and potential of something like the Twofer Film Festival and its Twofer rom-coms is also double-edged. The Twofer’s existence immediately calls into question the naturalized boundaries between self and other, and embodies a similar deconstructive logic to Donna Haraway’s cyborg politics. Because the logic of the Twofer “argues for pleasure in the confusion of boundaries and for responsibility in their construction,” Jackson’s use of twinned subjects offers a kind of double vision throughout the novel (Haraway 150). Even though entertainment events like the Twofer Film Festival assist in creating queer communities and queering public spaces, they do so by commodifying and capitalizing on sex/uality and desire. As Berlant and Freeman explain in “Queer Nationalism,” a critical component of postmodern queer politics is the adoption of the “individual and mass identities of consumers.” By occupying public spaces of consumption, Queer Nation politics exploit the “structures of identification and the embodied and disembodied scenes of erotic contact, substitution, publicity, and exchange so central to the allure of nationalism and capitalism.” Because so many aspects of queer worldbuilding rely on the tools of capitalism and mass culture, they operate “precisely in the

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<sup>1</sup> Advertising for the film very clearly made use of the Hilton twins’ legal issues. The original poster bears the phrase, “See why 21 states refused them a marriage license!”

American mode,” revealing that queer nationalism is not altogether different from nationalism and capitalism as a whole.

One success of the Twofer Film Festival, however, is that it bolsters self-narration for Twofers, which is key to building queer counterpublic forms. The novel presses upon this not only through its comingling of real and fictional Twofer pop culture, but also through Nora’s job as a telephone sex worker. By providing non-physical, narrative-based sexual experiences for her clients over the phone, Nora’s work begins to make the private act of sex into something more public. While the stories she tells for her clients aren’t writ large on the screen of the Twofer film festival, the use of the public utility (the telephone) as a medium to conduct sexual activity renders the sexual experience between Nora and her clients into something only semi-private. As “Tiffany Bells,” Nora is also narrating a world for herself. “My sex life became almost entirely fictional,” she says:

“I was at home in these worlds; nothing surprising ever happened there. My dream girls fluttered up like shapes scissored out of old magazines, smelling of ink and oxidized paper. They were biddable and a little old-hat. Like maps, they cracked in the used places. The hand-puppet hobgoblins flapped: the outraged husband, the anguished wife, the appalled key-hole peeper in pigtails, the coach, the policemen, maiden aunt. The consequences unfolded like the simplification of a mathematical equation, with solemn logic, and then x and y slipped out of their clothes and took their familiar poses by the equals sign. ‘Say “Thank you, Miss Tiffany.” Now be a good pony and call again soon!’”  
(42, 44)

The “worlds” that Nora creates for her clients, which the novel barely suggests are male, are “old-hat” and “familiar,” but also come into existence only through Nora’s acts of narration and

imagination akin to Haraway's vision of "cyborg writing" (Haraway 150). It is notable that Nora's occupation as a telephone sex worker enables her to create queer worlds for herself – even if they are created in the service of entertaining her implied straight male clientele. Inside her phone sex narratives, Nora is "at home" with the characters she creates and loves in spite of their predictability. Although the performance of these woman may be for a straight male audience, the pleasure for Nora is in the creation of the world itself. The fictional sex life Nora creates lies not in the tale, but the telling: in the act of "scissor[ing]" her "dream girls" to life on the phone. The dreamy quality applied to the women Nora pretends to be on the phone, as well as the description of their creation via a lesbian sex act, makes Nora's practice as a sex worker not just a world-building exercise in narrative, but an exercise in building queer worlds in which she seizes "the tools to mark the world that marked [her] as other" (Haraway 175). By retelling these old stories through a queer creator's lens, Nora displaces the "hierarchical dualisms of naturalized identities" while simultaneously maintaining their surface-level naturalness. Her queer telling of "straight" stories again suggests an ironic double-vision at play throughout *Half-Life*.

This double-vision is perhaps most clear in the following component of Nora's phone sex narratives: in her telephone stories, Nora imagines herself as having only one head (42). She is exceedingly suspicious of interactions with other members of the Twofer community within the novel, preferring instead to make herself an exception to community practice. Nora's privileging of her individual identity in her queer worlds, rather than acceptance of the Twofer counterpublic, speaks to her suspicions of the functionality of the counterpublic itself. Throughout the novel, Nora avoids interactions with the Twofer community, spending time instead with roommates Audrey (a "twin hag" filmmaker) and Trey, and communicating via

email with her ex-lover, Lo. She pleads with Audrey to get out of going to the Twofer Film Festival. “I don’t want to go. I’ll hyperventilate,” she protests. “You know I can’t sit in one room with all those freaks. I hate freaks” (19). Nora’s application of the pejorative “freaks” to the film festival attendees positions the counterpublic itself as something freakish, whereas Nora, in her quest for a Singleton bodily identity, occupies the position of the norm. Her comments reverse the traditional positioning of the audience at a freak show, who are assured of their normalcy by virtue of the presence of anomalous bodies onstage in front of them. At the film festival, Nora, the subject of Audrey’s documentary, imagines herself as a “normal” body in front of an audience whose own anomalous bodies make them freakish. By invoking this funhouse mirror version of the freak-normate binary that occupies the heart of literary criticism on freak shows and their denizens, Nora problematizes the notion of the counterpublic itself. Knowing that the audience isn’t simply Twofers, but also Twofer-identified singletons, Nora’s massification of these entities into a group of freaks suggests that inclusiveness does not protect the counterpublic, but instead sets up a framework in which queer bodies are regulated by national heterosexual contexts.

Nora’s critique of the Twofer Film Festival and its audience of Twofers and the Twofer-identified is another valence of Jackson’s double-vision. By invoking the freak-normate binary to describe her feelings about being publicly consumed as a documentary subject, Nora provides a counterpoint to the politics of visibility and inclusion media representation engenders. She suggests that the film festival undercuts its own political work by creating Twofers as consumable commodities to pacify public interest in their cause/embodiment. By imagining her audience of both Twofers and Twofer-identified singletons as freaks, she critiques their complacent consumption of homonormativity. Lisa Duggan defines the politics of

homonormativity as one “that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (50). By consuming images of themselves, through genres like romantic comedy which privilege narratives built on paradigms of national heterosexuality, both Twofers and their allies passively consume queerness as chic commodity.

Nora’s Siamese Twin Reference Manual also contains artifacts from the Singleton media that evidence the mainstream worldview of Siamese twins within the novel. An episode of a television show called “Close Focus on Twinsest” establishes parameters for Siamese twins’ sexual expression on the basis of heterosexuality. Parodying the popular anti-gay protest phrase, “It’s Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve,” Jackson’s fictional Dr. Marie argues that in the world of *Half-Life*, “It’s Adam and Eve, not Adam and Adam and Eve and Eve.” Dr. Marie, responding directly to a Twofers-proposed piece of legislation that would allow them to legally wed Singletons and other Twofers, further elaborates that any form of sex for a Siamese twin, including masturbation, is also illegal. “I’m here to talk about the growing problem of twincest,” Dr. Marie begins. “Let me tell you a story about a poor young God-fearing woman of my acquaintance who happens to be conjoined. Believing that marriage is between one man and one woman, she has taken a lifelong vow of chastity. But her twin is an unrepentant sinner who nightly taunts her with twincestuous acts. As my friend’s body burns with unwelcome pleasure, her soul burns in foreknowledge of the fires of hell. This is sexual abuse and soul-assassination, as I’ve explained to the sinner. What do you think she said to me? ‘It’s a division of labor. I sin, she repents’!” (164). Dr. Marie and other anti-Twofer characters in *Half-Life* clearly regulate the Twofers’ body on the basis of national (Singleton) heterosexuality, and in so doing deny individual

twins the right to control their own bodies and desires, which in turn establishes a baseline of homonormativity through which the novel's Twofer population self-regulates.

Dr. Marie and the "moral majority" of *Half-Life* highlight the very issues of queer legibility that Lee Edelman articulates in *Homographesis*. Edelman argues that the "issue of gay legibility" is inflected with "a sense of painful urgency" by both queer advocates and those who enforce homophobic norms, as both have "differing anxieties and differing stakes in the culture's reading of homosexuality and in its ability to read as homosexual any given individual" (4). The need to name homosexuality and apply this label to a particular body is disciplinary tool through which heterosexuality "has thus been able to reinforce the status of its own authority" against the "threat" of homosexuality. Because heterosexuality is naturalized in discourse, the threat homosexuality represents to heteronormative paradigms is especially pernicious because of its very invisibility and, therefore, "capacity to 'pass,'" which has necessitated "a variety of disciplinary 'knowledges' through which homosexuality might be recognized, exposed, and ultimately rendered, more ominously, invisible once more" (4). Legibility, therefore, functions as a kind of double-edged sword. With recognition comes not only the opportunity to identify, but also the ability to be identified. For queer subjects, this has led to a number of problematic understandings of homosexuality within medical, psychological, and cultural discourses in which queer acts are considered pathological, non-normative, or otherwise deviant. As Foucault notes in *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*, "We must not forget that the psychological, psychiatric, medical category of homosexuality was constituted from the moment it was characterized . . . The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species" (43). These disciplinary inscriptions of homosexual bodies, Edelman notes, not only make homosexuality legible, but also mark the homosexual body as inherently textual, and therefore open to being

(mis)read. The potential to be (mis)read also reflects back on the (presumed) unmarked white, heterosexual male body, demonstrating that homographesis itself is a kind of double-vision – a deconstructive logic.

The relationship between textuality and homosexuality described above, in which the homosexual as a category is created for the purpose of legibility, is one of the functions of what Edelman terms “homographesis.” Graphesis, he explains, is the point of articulation of a text, the place which limits where the writing is raised and also describes the act of writing as it actualizes itself. This names a double operation that is at once a limiting articulation, as well as an action which self-actualizes. A homograph is a word which shares the same written form as something else, but with a different origin and meaning. The combined term “homographesis” names a “double operation: one serving the ideological purpose of a conservative social order intent on codifying identities in its labor of disciplinary inscription, and the other resistant to that categorization, intent on de-scribing the identities that order has so oppressively inscribed” (8). The Foucauldian instance of homographesis named above represents the disciplinary operation of making homosexuality legible in order to regulate and manage it, which is replicated by the “moral majority” characters in Jackson’s novel to regulate and manage the Twofer population.

But Jackson’s text also offers multiple interventions with homographesis, some of which follow the disciplinary functions outlined by Foucault, while still others serve to strengthen the logic of national heterosexuality through appropriation of the Twofer as an ideal national body – all of which complicate Edelman’s initial formulation by extending the functions of homographesis to bodies other than those belonging to white men. Just as Chang & Eng’s press materials proposed their linked bodies as a resolution to national conflict, *Half-Life*’s Siamists view the Twofer population as an ideal form. As Nora and Blanche’s mother explains,

“According to our teachings the world is ‘Siamese,’ or conjoined with a twin world with which it is at war. This split generates the life force in that it motivates us to year toward images of wholeness, whether it be in a loved one – that’s the ancient myth of the Hermaphrodite – or in the fully integrated self, as in the modern myth of psychotherapy and self-help” (45). The Siamist point of view applies Twofers embodiment to Singleton living, reading the conjoined body as symbolic of both the fulfillment of a lover’s quest for an “other half” and personal wholeness. Their metaphoric application of the Siamese twin, I suggest, is another function of homographesis in the novel: the Siamist perspective on Twofers appropriates the conjoined body as an ideal form through a heterosexual matrix. The invocation of the hermaphrodite assumes an explicitly heterosexual understanding of coupling (in that one’s other half should be ideally represented as being of the opposite gender), which further perpetuates national heterosexuality. Likewise, the Siamist reading of Twofers as a metaphor for self-unity hearkens back to nineteenth century readings of Chang & Eng as synecdoches for national unity. In this case, the very logics that enable Twofers to be “read,” also enable their symbolic appropriation through the lens of neoliberal multiculturalism, a twentieth and twenty-first century version of the nineteenth century understanding of national unity.

Indeed, *Half-Life*’s Siamists laud the Twofers population as a national type, and herald the conjoined twin as an American form for the new millennium. “It is no accident that it is only now as we approach a new millennium,” they write, “that a new people has stepped through the very split they are destined to heal: twofers. From among their ranks, a new Columbus will rise two heads, screen four eyes and two hands, and shout Land-Ho – pointing in the one direction we forgot to look: inward” (103). The Siamists view the Twofers body as a physical representation of resolution for numerous crises of American identity, which is fractured and

hyphenated rather than unified. The hyphen, in fact, is on The Unity Foundation's "list of abominations" (288). This lack of coherence, the limit of American exceptionalism and individuality, is referred to as "National Penitence" and "American Sadness," and rooted in the ground of the Nevada test site of the atomic bomb (224). *Half-Life*'s Twofers, then, serve the same rhetorical function for the Siamists that Chang & Eng did for the American public during the Civil War. Their conjoined body bridges identities and resolves conflict through physical proximity and cohesion – a metaphor for nationalism.

The Siamist point of view, like the camp counterpolitics of Queer Nation, shifts "between a utopian politics of identity, difference, dispersion, and specificity and a pluralist agenda, in the liberal sense, that imagines a "gorgeous mosaic" of difference without a model of conflict" (Berlant and Freeman 149). By transforming the Twofers body into a political and spiritual commodity, the Siamists transform identity into a style "which makes good on the promise that the citizen should finally be allowed to own, in addition to all the other vicarious bodies Queer Nation has for sale, his very own national body" (Berlant and Freeman 164). This style, however, is fundamentally imagined in terms of internal cohesion and national homogeneity, a literal embodiment of "e pluribus unum" – "out of many, one." The Siamist reimagining of the "new nation" is in fact not that new at all, repackaging nineteenth century nationalist logics as a queer product of capital.

Nora is rightly suspicious not only of the visibility of the Twofers counterculture, but also of the Siamist appropriation thereof. Nora's suspicion reveals the problems of legibility for queer identities and counterpublic forms. Where Edelman warns of the disciplinary and regulatory functions of graphesis, the novel's inclusion of the Siamists and Nora's suspicions of her lovers' motives illustrate that the emergence of counterpublic forms and queer legibility also run the risk

of being appropriated by and subsumed into national heterosexuality. In the novel, Nora's responds to these issues by rejecting her identity as a Twofer and enlisting the services of a mysterious group known as the Unity Foundation to "divorce" herself from her twin.

The Unity Foundation provides those living in binary form with the opportunity to become a unified self through the elective execution of one twin via decapitation. The foundation refers to this procedure as "The Divorce." In the world of the novel (and in the non-fictional world), Siamese twins are legally considered two persons, so the doctor-assisted individuality surgery offered by The Unity Foundation is actually an illegal, institutionalized form of murder. Though it operates through the guise of elective surgery, The Unity Foundation functions as the ultimate regulatory control for Twofer embodiment. By offering the novel's queer population the option of attaining Singleton embodiment, the foundation both designates difference, and effectively overwrites it. The Siamists likewise name the difference embodied by the Twofer population, and re-inscribe this embodiment in heteronormative terms. Both the Siamists and The Unity Foundation therefore participate in homographic inscriptions of the Twofer body.

The clearly regulatory function of The Unity Foundation is enabled by the Twofer's own self-inscription as a counterpublic, exposing the double operation of naming queer embodiment. However, The Unity Foundation's process of regulation seemingly also enables Twofer bodies to "pass" for Singleton, which negates the heterosexual principle of "an essential (and oppositional) identity" based on categorical differentiation between homosexual bodies and heterosexual bodies. By remaking Twofer bodies on the image of Singleton bodies, The Unity Foundation serves the homosexual principle of introducing "difference or heterogeneity into what passes for the same" (Edelman 14). But passing in this case, as in others, ultimately reifies the dominant paradigm in its visual erasure of embodied difference. Passing as a Singleton in the novel comes

at the very high cost of exterminating one's twin. So rather than allowing Twofers to "pass" as Singletons and disrupt the national heterosexual paradigm silently from within, The Unity Foundation violently forces heterosexual embodiment of members of the Twofer population, coercing their consent to be reduced to an essential, single identity.

The Unity Foundation's surgically-assisted cohesion starkly contrasts The Siamist understanding of the Twofer body as an ideal national form. As Edelman suggests, heterosexuality "seeks to assure the sameness or purity internal to the categorical 'opposites' of anatomical 'sex' by insisting that relations of desire must testify to a difference only imaginable outside, and thus 'between' these two 'natural,' 'self-evident' categories, homosexuality would multiply the differences that desire can apprehend in ways that menace the internal coherence of the sexed identities that the order of heterosexuality demands" (14). In other words, national heterosexuality operates by maintaining categorical differences in the service of perpetuating the national through domestication and all it entails. The mutilation of the Twofer body replaces incoherence with self-evident sameness. The Siamists, on the other hand, laud the Twofer body's multiplied difference, but appropriate its queer potential. Siamist logic reads the Twofer body as its own kind of internal coherence, applying heterosexual logic to the Twofer body. This reading both describes difference, and re-inscribes queer desire as heterosexual order. By heralding the Twofer as a "new Columbus" for an incoherent nation, the Siamists not only craft a synechdocal relationship between the Twofer body and the nation, but appropriate queer embodiment for the benefit of heterosexual imperatives.

The Twofer homographs created by The Unity Foundation and the Siamists effectively participate in only one side of the possibilities of cultural inscription Edelman articulates. For while homographesis benefits heterosexual paradigms in a number of ways, the graphesis itself,

the cultural inscription of homosexual possibilities “effectively disrupts the cognitive stability that the visual perception of ‘sameness’ and ‘difference’ would otherwise serve to anchor,” can and does deconstruct the “binary logic of sexual difference on which symbolic identity is based” (12). By pressing upon the ironies of sameness and difference through the Twofer body, *Half-Life* engages homographesis as part of the novel’s strategic double-vision. While groups like The Unity Foundation and the Siamists prove how homographesis can serve a stabilizing function for heterosexuality, the novel’s narrative structure intentionally undercuts these moments of heterosexual stability through the practice of homographesis, that is: writing about queer bodies in a manner that de-scribes and resists categories built on the oppressive logic of national heterosexuality.

Jackson’s novel seemingly resists structural coherence. In addition to the aforementioned selections from *The Siamese Twin Reference* manual that break up Nora’s narration, the narration itself vacillates between Nora’s remembrances of her childhood in Too Bad, NV and the genesis of her sister and herself as she tries to pinpoint the moment Blanche fell asleep, and the quest to find The Unity Foundation that drives the plot of the contemporary parts of the narrative. Nora’s words loop around themselves, leading her to sketch the timeline of events in the novel as a Venn diagram of overlapping narratives that move on opposing timelines (434). In an attempt at organizational coherence, the novel is divided into four sections labeled by Boolean search operators: NOT, XOR, OR, and AND. The novel moves through the sets in that order, moving from the intentionally binary “NOT” to “the intersection set” of “AND” (386). At the beginning of the “AND” section of the book, Nora relies on *The Siamese Twin Reference* manual to explain the principles of Boolean as a critique of Western culture. The Manual asserts that it is “effectively impossible to seal out the other,” citing that though the binary NOT has

dominated Western thought, “a close look at any apparent homogeneity will reveal XOR, OR, and AND at play within it” (385). The Manual suggests that Boolean logic is a cyborg logic, an ironic way “out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves. This is a dream not of a common language, but of a powerful infidel heteroglossia” (Haraway 181). Twofer logic may be dual by nature, but it is also explicitly non-binary, resisting easy categorization of self/other, this/that, or not.

It is during Nora’s attempts to execute her non compos mentis twin that she discovers that Blanche has been waking while Nora sleeps, and has also been trying to “Divorce” herself from her sister. As Nora attempts to reconstruct her waking (and sleeping) moments to understand how she and her sister came to each be living half a life, the novel itself begins to dissolve Nora’s narrative voice in the final paragraphs of the novel. The final page reveals a note the narrator can’t remember writing, in which all the words are blank and the punctuation is all that remains. “I can read it perfectly,” she says. “I scribble until the ink comes. I want to go back and fill in the gaps. But somewhere in the house, someone is speaking. ‘Nora?’ I say” (437). The novel’s final paragraphs indicate that Blanche, the twin whose voice readers have not been introduced to up until this point in the novel, has taken over the act of narrating, yet Nora can still be heard “speaking” somewhere in the house. What readers are meant to understand from this exchange is that Blanche’s own narrative has been crafted below the surface of Nora’s. Blanche’s rise to the position of narrator at the novel’s conclusion reveals that her voice had always been a part of what appeared to be a monologic narrative. Revealing “the multiple histories informing graphic ‘identities’” introduces another valence of homographesis (13). Furthermore, the integrity of Nora’s singular narrative voice is also disrupted by her own writing

practices. The inclusion of *The Siamese Twin Reference Manual*, songs, stories, and newspaper clippings about Twofers likewise embed multiple histories within Nora's graphic identity.

By the novel's end, Nora's act of writing has become less about writing herself into an existence to be named, read, and potentially misread, and more about writing herself into illegibility. Her last few chapters catalogue the crisis that legibility brings her. She begins to list strategies to avoid sharing her graphic identity with her sister:

“To write in a language she doesn't know.

To write in a language only I know.

To write in a language I don't know, either.

To write in a language nobody knows.

To not write.

...

To write what I do not believe.

To write what I do not understand.

To not write.

To not write.” (350-351)

As Nora loses control over her ability to represent herself, her strategies for obfuscation engage in a critique of the visibility of the counterpublic. Her insistence “to not write” ostensibly prevents her Twofers narrative from being co-opted in the service of national heterosexuality, and also removes her from participation in the counterpublic. As she ceases writing and allows Blanche to take over, Nora's intentional illegibility writes her out of both public and counterpublic life by preventing her own representation.

Nora Olney's strategy for circumnavigating national heterosexuality and the queer counterpublics that become co-opted in the service of national paradigms functions as a kind of disidentification. In *Performing Disidentifications*, José Esteban Muñoz locates the work of disidentification within the "technolog[ies] of the self" such as writing, singing, and theatrical performance – all of which become arenas through which the performer/artist can create a self that stands in-between the normative hegemonic and its counter-identification. The in-between position of disidentification "neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology ... that tries to transform a cultural logic from within" (11). Disidentification, then, is a distinctly flexible position that responds to the "flux of discourse and power" and is able to adapt and shift "as quickly as power does within discourse" (19). To disidentify offers a critical space for subjects with identities-in-flux to critique the stable categories they shuttle between.

I qualify Nora's disidentifactory practice with "a kind of" because while she is clearly disidentifying, the novel's ending both critiques the stability of identity categories like gay/straight, Twofers/Singleton, or Nora/Blanche, but also gives the onus of narration over to Blanche, replacing Nora entirely. In doing so, identities-in-flux are once again made stable for the reader, and the critical space this disidentification opens up is once again closed down precisely because of Nora's refusal to write. By disengaging with "technologies of the self," Nora resists any kind of graphic identity at all, and by writing herself out of the narrative, erases the potential for disidentification that homographesis can provide.

The titular character in John Cameron Mitchell's stage play and film *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* more effectively engages in homographesis' disidentifactory potential. By focusing not on rigid categories of gender identity or sexual orientation, but on a body that resides in

between binary spaces, Hedwig becomes a catalyst for performative subversion. Not only does their transgender body defy binary gender logics, but their position as a writer/performer also enables them to create physical spaces that engender queer world-building. Hedwig's identification as a person who exists between binaries works against the double operation of homographesis and builds queerworlds through self-narration.

The "Angry Inch" of genitalia makes Hedwig's body particularly ambiguous: a body that is neither male nor female, and yet also somehow both. Hedwig understands their bodily reality as "atrocious," which they joke would also be the name of their perfume. "It's a fragrance for a man or a woman," they quip. "Or a freak" (16). But although Hedwig constructs their material body as freakish ambiguity, they also imbue it with critical potential. The show opens with Yitzak, Hedwig's beleaguered husband, comparing Hedwig to the Berlin wall in the rock'n'roll manifesto "Tear Me Down":

Ladies and Gentleman, Hedwig is like that wall  
 standing before you in the divide  
 between East and West,  
 Slavery and Freedom,  
 Man and Woman,  
 Top and Bottom. (7-8)

Yitzak situates Hedwig as fully "in-between" oppositional structures, neither endorsing a dominant position, nor strictly opposing it. He goes on to intimate that Hedwig's in-betweenness, like the Berlin wall that separated the city in which they were raised, is a kind of "intolerable ambiguity" that hegemonic normativity might want to "tear down" to maintain its own dominance. Yitzak implicates the audience in this desire, singing, "You can try and tear her

down, / but before you do, / you must remember one thing” (8). Thus, Yitzak positions Hedwig’s freakishness against a “featureless, uniform mass” public represented by both the theatrical audience and the diegetic audience.<sup>2</sup> The normativity of the theater audience is dependent on Hedwig’s existence in the in-between, a position they solidify when they sing, “There ain’t much of a difference / between a bridge and a wall / Without me right in the middle, babe / you would be nothing at all” (8). Hedwig, like that wall, works from this in-between place to demonstrate that both binary positions depend on their strangeness to make sense of themselves.

In *Hedwig & the Angry Inch*, the freak is not the opposite of the norm, but a position that disidentifies with the normative and its constitutive opposite. Their in-betweenness revises Victor Turner’s notion of liminality by reconstructing it as a permanent mode of existence. In *The Ritual Process*, Turner argues that liminality often leads to *communitas*, a state of equality and solidarity that stands in opposition to hegemonic norms. However, Turner goes on to conclude that this is only possible within ritual, and that the normative social structure returns when the ritual concludes. *Hedwig & the Angry Inch* reworks liminality by suggesting that in-betweenness can become a permanent disidentification through embodiment. The text offers Hedwig’s freakish ambiguity as a critical site through which such binaries can be contested and reworked, which implies that some kind of *communitas* may also be achieved by rewriting the freak (and the queer) as central to the public.

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<sup>2</sup> The diegetic audience in the film version of *Hedwig* is represented as bored, white folks from middle America who are, for all intents and purposes, very “square.” They are often shown as bored or indifferent to Hedwig’s presence. While it’s hardly possible to conjecture at the makeup of any theatrical audience at a film screening of *Hedwig & the Angry Inch* or the makeup of an audience at any production (local, national, or Broadway), I would guess, at least based on my various viewing experiences with both the film version and the stage show, that the audiences for these are more varied than the diegetic audience of the film suggests. Because the stage show is so overtly queer, I have not been surprised to recognize members of my local queer and performance community in the audience. For the purposes of this argument, however, I am abiding by the logic that theatrical audiences in general lose their particularity once the lights go down.

Technologies of the self, as Muñoz describes them, are a key part of the process of rewriting marginalized bodies as central to public life. In his close reading of vocal performances in James Baldwin's *Just Above My Head*, Muñoz raises the provocation that the ““real self” who comes into being through fiction is not the self who produces fiction, but is instead produced by fiction” (20). This formulation suggests that it is the text that creates the self, regardless of whether or not that text is self-authored. Because performers, artists, and writers are subjects that stand both inside and outside fiction, ideology, and “the real,” they are driven to disidentify not by textual authority, but by something outside of both themselves and the texts’ authors. Muñoz best describes the process of disidentification in performance through a jazz singer’s rendition of a standard song in Baldwin’s *Just Above My Head*. Rather than singing the song note-for-note as written on the chart, the singer “works on the song with fierce intensity and the utmost precision. This utmost precision is needed to rework that song, that story, that fiction, that mastering plot. It is needed to make a self – to disidentify despite the ear-splitting hostility that the song first proposed for the singer . . . Thus we hear and sing disidentification. The relations between the two are so interlaced and crisscrossed—reception and performance, interpretation and praxis – that it seems foolish to straighten out this knot” (21). This reading of Baldwin suggests that it is through performance that marginalized subjects are able to interpret and resignify ideology from the inside, “remaking and rewriting a dominant script,” thus occupying a space of disidentification in which political and cultural work can be done (23).

The plot of *Hedwig & the Angry Inch* is an exercise in self-narration, remaking a cisgender, heteronormative narrative into a queer one through its telling. The show itself is Hedwig’s one-woman show, backed by a rock band, the titular Angry Inch, as they tour the country playing dive bars and warehouses in the literal shadow of the amphitheatres where their

ex-lover and mainstream rockstar heartthrob Tommy Gnosis is playing his “Tour of Atonement” (9). Hedwig attempts to narrate their own life story, but is constantly haunted by their life with Tommy, whose music spills into their show whenever they open a door to the alleyway upstage. Immediately after Hedwig performs “Tear Me Down” as the introduction to their own concert, they open the alleyway door to hear Tommy’s fans cheering as he cries “together, no one’s gonna tear us down” and begins singing Hedwig’s song (10). Tommy’s theft of Hedwig’s creative work coopts queer culture, similar to the way the Siamists’ appropriate Twofers imagery in *Half-Life*. Both Tommy and the Siamists effectively appropriate the embodied practices of marginalized communities to further their own spiritual and commercial successes, capitalizing on the cultural cache of freakishness within neoliberal multiculturalism. Although Hedwig is the originator of all of Tommy’s songs, and the theatrical audience (who also serve as the diegetic audience in this case) are aware of this fact, reader/viewers are also tasked with believing that audiences within the world of the text see Tommy as the creator of a series of ampitheatre rock ballads with poetic lyrics born from a teenage Midwestern genius. The narrative structure of *Hedwig & the Angry Inch* therefore sets up textuality itself as a contested site through which Hedwig can disidentify with the mainstream. By asserting their right to sing and perform what the diegetic audience knows to be Tommy’s songs, Hedwig works on and through the texts to re-author herself through their own stolen music. Because theatrical audiences only hear snippets of what Tommy has done to Hedwig’s songs, and instead are privy to full-text versions of Hedwig’s renditions, the audience understands Hedwig’s versions as authentic and genuine. Their performances effectively reclaim these stories/songs from dominant cultural uses as part of Tommy’s repertoire.

Every actor who dons Hedwig's wigs and heels plays the character a little bit differently, which asserts each performer's own way of working on and through the text to author himself.<sup>3</sup> However, regardless of the actor, Hedwig's performances of the songs that structure the narrative differ significantly from the snippets of Tommy's version of the songs the audience hears filtering through the alleyway door. While his songs might generally be categorized as bland arena-rock, each of Hedwig's versions of the songs is infused with a lively punk sensibility. This sensibility is a key factor in their ability to create queer worlds. In a later chapter of *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, Muñoz explores the relationship between queerness as a "stage" and queerness on stages. In his examination of empty performance spaces in gay bars and punk clubs, Muñoz identifies the stage as a blank space for utopian performativity. Punk rock shows and drag shows, he proposes, are critical sites in which utopias are performed. "For those of us whose relationship to popular culture is always marked by aesthetic and sexual antagonism," Muñoz writes of the queer community, "these stages are our actual utopian rehearsal rooms, where we work on a self that does not conform to the mandates of cultural logics such as late capitalism [and] heteronormativity" (111).

Hedwig works on and through culture to perform not only their disidentification with heteronormativity, but also to transform public spaces into queer utopias. It is necessary to revisit the ways in which space and performance genre intersect to remake public spaces into queer

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<sup>3</sup> The role of Hedwig, originated by John Cameron Mitchell, has been played almost exclusively by queer actors, until the 2014 Broadway revival. The show launched at the Belasco Theatre in March 2014 with Neil Patrick Harris in the role, but since Harris's departure, the role has been filled by an equal number of gay-identified actors (Andrew Rannells, John Cameron Mitchell) and straight actors (Michael C. Hall, Darren Criss). The straight actors, interestingly, are most recognized for roles where they played queer characters (Hall as David Fisher on *Six Feet Under* and Criss as Blaine on *Glee*). While there may be some elements of appropriation of queer authorial strategies by these straight-identified actors, Hall and Criss's involvement in Hedwig perhaps speaks less to their own attempts to further their acting careers with a controversial role than to a show of allyship. In accepting and portraying a role that is so ironically queer, actors like Hall and Criss make a move toward solidarity with their numerous queer fans, even if they themselves do not identify as such.

worlds. Muñoz's discussion of staging utopias cites both drag bars and punk rock clubs, and Mitchell & Trask's Hedwig draws on performance aesthetics from both scenes. Though they are transgender, Hedwig's look is not about passing as female. Their big blonde wigs, complete with oversized victory rolls that they call "lungs," overdrawn lips and eyes, and affection for glitter all oversignify their gender presentation (15). The aesthetics of drag permeate their performance of self, to the point where makeup and hair become as much of a technology of selfhood as music does. This drag aesthetic is accompanied by Hedwig's affinity for distressed denim, studded leather heels and jackets, and a general punk rock attitude. The 2014 Broadway revival of the show finds the various actors donning Hedwig's denim mini-skirts, stomping their heels on the hood of a car at center stage, as well as offering the audience the "rock and roll gesture" of spitting beer into the orchestra pit, followed by taking another swig and spitting it all over themselves in a "punk rock gesture," quipping, "It's the direction of the aggression that defines it" (24). At one point, Hedwig parades onstage in a fur coat splattered with red paint stains from an encounter with anti-fur protesters. The paint splatter is a punch-line, delivered simply by Hedwig turning their back to the audience as though unaware of its presence. However, this paint-splattered fur coat only further enhances Hedwig's punk rock aesthetics. Rather than treating the object as ruined, its defacement enhances its value, both defying and transforming capitalist logics of valuation. The coat, like Hedwig, becomes a text that is written on and over by other cultural influences, and used in performative acts in defiance of normativity. Though they wear it only briefly in the show, the coat becomes as much of a visible signifier of Hedwig's punk rock aesthetics as the spitting demonstration. These acts, when coupled with their physical takeover and transformation of everyday spaces and stages, transform Hedwig into a utopic figure who exists within the normative public, not outside of it.

By identifying all their freakish punk rock glory as central to notions of normativity, Hedwig suggests that the freak haunts the normative from within, and this internal disruption is where transformation can occur. Mitchell and his musical collaborator Stephen Trask note in their script that the performance was “deliberately developed ... over a number of years in non-theatrical venues – rock clubs, drag bars, birthday parties, friends’ patios – in order to keep it free-flowing, improvisational, alive” (3). The performance, then, can take over everyday spaces and transform them into something theatrical, which allows Hedwig’s disidentification to become legible. Further, Mitchell notes that “every production should be site-specific so that the character of Hedwig is actually performing in and commenting on the space the production is occupying.”<sup>4</sup> The presence of Hedwig’s freakishness, then, physically changes the spaces they inhabit, and the performers are encouraged to rewrite the text to promote this.

Hedwig’s physical takeover and transformation of both performance spaces and non-performance spaces exemplifies their disidentifactory state. Where Tommy’s tour takes place in amphitheatres and stadiums, Hedwig’s shadow tour takes place in bars, small theatres, and, in the case of the film, a chain of Bilgewater’s seafood restaurants. The site-specific nature of these locations both highlights Hedwig’s otherness and their delegitimation as a queer performer whose work has been coopted by the heterosexual mainstream, as well as creates new queer spaces. Because these spaces are quotidian, they are transformed by Hedwig’s presence, and become spaces through which they disidentify.

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<sup>4</sup> In January 2013, Seattle’s Balagan Theatre Company staged *Hedwig & the Angry Inch* at the Moore Theatre with local drag queen and winner of *RuPaul’s Drag Race* Jinkx Monsoon as Hedwig. Many jokes about espresso and Kurt Cobain found their way into this production, and the staging intentionally played off the theater’s current use as a rock venue, allowing Monsoon to roam through the aisles on a cordless microphone, sit on audience members’ laps, and, briefly, crowd-surf.

Likewise, Hedwig's life story is framed as a travelogue, traversing both countries and continents, as well as "the geography of human contact, the triangulation of a pair of eyes on my face, the latitude and longitude of a hand on my body" (10). It is through contact with their ex-husband Luther that Hedwig leaves East Berlin for Junction City, Kansas, and it is through contact with Tommy that they instigate the tour, the narrative impetus for the show itself. "You see, ladies and gentleman, the road is my home. My home, the road," Hedwig explains. "And when I think of all the people I have come upon in my travels, I have to think about all the people who have come upon me" (10). Though most speakers use the phrase "the road is my home" metaphorically, Hedwig's utterance reads a bit more literal. Hedwig's invocation of the road-as-home establishes a distinct sense of placelessness, a lack of belonging, for a person who disidentifies. The joke about their sexual encounters further suggests that "the only clues" they have to their "place in the world" are the traces of sex acts (10). Their understanding of belonging, therefore, is mediated through sexual activity, effectively building a community that transforms private intimacies into public life.

By transforming and transmuting physical spaces, Hedwig effectively crafts queerworlds – the promise of counterpublics -- for themselves and their partners, offering these spaces as places of refuge and *communitas*. As Hedwig sings in "Wicked Little Town:"

“And when you're someone you are not,  
 And Junction City ain't the spot,  
 Remember Mrs. Lot  
 And when she turned around.  
 And if you got no other choice  
 You know you can follow my voice

Through the dark turns and noise  
 Of this wicked little town.” (27)

The lyrics offer Hedwig as a new model of being, a pillar of a community that exists not as a bastion of the commercialized Queer Nation, but a figure within “this wicked little town.” The town in question is unspecified, but is representative of places like Junction City, Kansas and other heteronormative public spaces. These spaces are decidedly non-cosmopolitan, and are populated by local characters, rather than national types. Hedwig’s disidentifactory potential enables their queerness to exist within “this wicked little town,” offering themselves to audiences as a voice that they can “follow . . . through the dark turns and noise.” Hedwig’s vision of community within the abstract space of the small town extends Berlant & Warner’s queer world-making project by decoupling queerness from nationalism. Hedwig’s counterpublic exists in the spaces that are most representative of America (i.e. small towns, the heartland), while simultaneously distancing those spaces from the project of imagining the American<sup>5</sup>. While Benedict Anderson would argue that readers imagine the local as synecdochal for the national in the literary imagination, Hedwig’s lyrics suggest an alternative point of view. The line “And Junction City ain’t the spot” suggests both a call to disidentify with spaces that seem to be symbolically hetero-nationalist, as well as a distancing from geographic space as a basis through which to imagine community. Hedwig suggests that queer community is imagined not in terms of Queer Nation or queer commodity culture, but through public intimacy and performance.

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<sup>5</sup>This reading holds true at least within the diegetic world of the narrative. The fact that *Hedwig & the Angry Inch* recently completed a year on Broadway at the Belasco Theatre, and has launched a U.S. National tour to major cities like San Francisco, Los Angeles, Chicago, Minneapolis, etc. suggests instead that touring a show like *Hedwig* is representative of the “camp counterpolitics of the Queer Nation,” a commodified version of queerness that is soon to stomp and spit on the stages of respectable theatres across America.

By inviting Tommy (and ostensibly the audience) to follow them, Hedwig becomes a utopic figure, burning with the “anticipation and promise” Muñoz attributes to the economies of desire and desiring that make up queer utopias. In *Cruising Utopia*, he disputes Edelman’s singular identification of futurity with national heterosexual reproduction. In its place, Edelman offers queerness, which Muñoz posits as a kind of performative futurity. He describes queerness as utopic because it is “not yet there,” and performative because performance always calls into question the reality of what is physically present (26). Through his archive of materialist philosophy, Muñoz reconfigures queer utopias as primordially pure, empty spaces that enable queerness emerge (38). These voids, he suggests, offer radical potential for contact, emergence, and creation. In essence, these voids enable queer world-building. Hedwig’s voice in “Wicked Little Town” calls out to the audience (and Tommy) from the void, transforming the darkness into queer potentiality.

Hedwig narrates their life story as a search for their “other half” within this void (14).

They contemplate:

“What does this person look like? Identical to me? Or somehow complimentary? Does my other half have what I don’t? Did he get the looks, the luck, the love? Were we really separated forcibly or did he just run off with the good stuff? Or did I? . . . And what about sex? Is that how we put ourselves back together again? Is that what Daddy was trying to . . .? Or can two people actually become one again? And if we’re driving on the Autobahn when it happens, can we still use the diamond lane?” (14)

This series of rhetorical questions returns to images of conjoined bodies to discuss coupling, both heterosexual and homosexual. Where Chang & Eng (and perhaps also Daisy & Violet) were already each other’s other half in perfect fraternal and sororal unions, Hedwig’s monologue turns

the lived reality of Siamese twins into a national metaphor once again. Not only does Hedwig wonder if it is possible “to put ourselves back together again,” but they wonder what the legal ramifications of doing so would be when they ask if it would still be possible to use the diamond lane on the Autobahn if they were once again conjoined with their “other half.”

The conjoined twin imagery even guides Hedwig’s understanding of their own body. During “Exquisite Corpse,” they describe their body as the titular collage type, made up of discrete parts “all sewn up” in which “the legs are two lovers entwined” (32). Not only, then, does twinning permeate Hedwig’s understanding of romantic relationships, but also their understanding of themselves. Their body, therefore, is doubly incomplete: not only is their transgender body an “exquisite corpse” because the “sex-change operation got botched” leaving them with a “one-inch mound of flesh / where my penis used to be / where my vagina never was,” but they are also missing a lover that completes them – their “other half” (20). Images of conjoinment in *Hedwig & the Angry Inch* operate both as the sentimental romantic ideal, and the embodiment of queer potentiality, yet again engaging the trope’s symbolic double-vision. When Hedwig meets Tommy Gnosis neé Speck, they recognize him as their missing twin:

“He laughs and I am filled with an ancient clarity. He’s the one. (*The “Origin of Love” chords drift in. Projection: two complementary faces looking at each other.*) No blood in my eyes, no blood on his face. He’s the one. The one who was taken. The one who left. The twin born by fission. He’ll die in fusion. Our fusion, cold fusion, unlimited power, unlimited knowledge. The secrets he must hold. The memories shared. The words to complete the sentence that began: ‘I am ...!’” (29-30).

Like the nuclear tests that birth a generation of Twofers in *Half-Life*, Hedwig too utilizes the language of nuclear power as an explanation of the domestic couple form. Where fission splits

the ideal twin form into distinct individual atoms, fusion marries the two back together to form a stronger, heavier atom. Fission and fusion also inform the scientific theories regarding the genesis of conjoined twins. Fission theorists propose that conjoinment is the result of a single egg splitting partially, while fusion theorizes that a single egg separates completely, but is drawn back toward a twin egg seeking compatible stem cells. Whether speaking in nuclear or biological terms, the metaphor is apt, given the legal rights and privileges that accompany the couple form vis a vis marriage.

The song “The Origin of Love” underscores Hedwig’s realization that Tommy is their “other half,” and this orchestral reprise of the song also recapitulates the metaphor of conjoinment. “The Origin of Love” retells Aristophanes’ speech from Plato’s *Symposium* on love’s origins through a combination of music and animation. It is the second song Hedwig performs in the show, framed as a bedtime story their mother used to tell them when they were a child as they lay in bed “like two pieces of a puzzle that don’t quite fit but are jammed together” (11). In it, both homosexual and heterosexual relationships are described as the result of the fission and fusion of conjoined bodies:

There were three sexes then,  
 One that looked like two men  
 Glued up back to back,  
 Called the children of the sun  
 And similar in shape and girth  
 Were the children of the Earth  
 They looked like two girls  
 Rolled up in one

And the children of the moon  
 Looked like a fork shoved on a spoon  
 They were part sun, part earth,  
 Part daughter, part son. (11-12)

The lyrics clearly invoke a prelapsarian world in which doubled bodies of all gender combinations are possible and the Siamese twin is an ideal form. Within the text of the song, romantic love is further constructed as the desire to find one's way back to one's twin after being "split in two" by a host of angry gods (14). This desire to be reunited in a bodily capacity with one's twin is what Hedwig dubs "the origin of love," born of a need to wrap "our arms around each other / trying to shove ourselves back together . . . making love" (14). The lyrics of "Origin of Love" reproduce the sentimental values of romantic love attached to Chang & Eng in the nineteenth century, whose double male body became emblematic of a perfect union, both in national and domestic terms.

Mitchell & Trask, via Plato, continue this tradition of reading the Siamese twin as an ideal romantic form, but admit the critically queer possibilities of these unions, rather than appropriating them to serve national heterosexuality. By including bodies that are "two men glued up back to back" and "two girls rolled up in one" as well as heterosexual pairings that "look like a fork shoved on a spoon," the Siamese twin becomes not simply emblematic of national heterosexuality, but of the possibility of queer worlds – separate and distinct from the "forked shoved on a spoon" description of heterosexuality, which appears by contrast denaturalized and inhuman. Mitchell's lyrics explicitly compare each set of twinned lovers to a celestial body: the earth (female-female), the sun (male-male), the moon (male-female). The appellations "children of the sun," "children of the earth," and "children of the moon" each

suggest that these bodies belong to a specific world, and that each occupies physical space.

Though these twinned images are built around the notion of romantic coupledness, it is worth noting that these forms are not explicitly *domestic* forms. That is, the worlds envisioned in Mitchell's lyrics do not domesticate their twinned subjects in a legal sense, or offer regulations for participation in a national sense. While it is possible to read these images as participating in heteronormative and homonormative constructions of sexual citizenship, I am interested in the song's suggestion that queer worlds are not only possible, but made visible and real through performance.

By narrating their past relationships through prior texts like Plato and snippets of pop songs, Hedwig establishes their own performance as a utopic space. "Utopian performativity is often fueled by the past," Muñoz writes. "The past, or at least narratives of the past, enable utopian imaginings of another time and place that is not yet here, but nonetheless functions as a doing for futurity, a conjuring of both future and past to critique presentness" (107). Both the reflective structure of their narration and the return to prior texts like the *Symposium* establish the past as a site of possibility through which Hedwig performs their queer utopia. Hedwig embodies this utopic possibility to "enact queer worlds in the present" by utilizing such technologies of the self as singing and performing. In doing so, they create a "future in the present," which repurposes the notion of utopia "in the service of subaltern politics" (49). By performing their memories, both personal and cultural, Hedwig reminds audiences of the ways in which memory is both constructed and political. Their longing for a twin is a critical part of their performance of self, not because it demonstrates a desire to participate in heteronormative notions of citizenship, but because this longing acts as what Muñoz calls "public-sex-mimetic cultural production,"

which helps “carve out a space for actual, living sexual citizenship” (35). Once again, the image of the conjoined twin is central to Hedwig’s cultural production of a public, sexual self.

What lies at the heart of Hedwig’s narrative performance of the self is their memory of their relationship with Tommy Gnosis, the young rock star whom Hedwig claims to have taught everything he knows. Hedwig describes Tommy as their “twin,” and begins a relationship with the young man that’s enabled by music. It is by watching them perform that Tommy falls in love with Hedwig, and their relationship progresses through guitar lessons and shared songs. In this case, sharing becomes plagiarism as Tommy Gnosis gains mainstream fame as a recording artist by plagiarizing Hedwig’s songs (notably, “Origin of Love”). In doing so, Tommy’s theft of the song once again appropriates queer culture for commercial purposes, capitalizing on the “queer chic” of Hedwig’s words and music for his own gain. His erasure of Hedwig’s participation in the songwriting process recapitulates the nineteenth century appropriation of conjoined twins as national symbols, and serves as a critique of neoliberal multiculturalism (which performs a similar operation). His refusal to “share” the song with Hedwig forces a rift between the two that is only mended through Hedwig’s twin-like incorporation with Tommy Gnosis, a moment which occurs during Hedwig’s performance of “Exquisite Corpse.” As the song builds to a discordant polyphonic collapse:

“She tears open her dress and pulls two tomatoes out of her bra. She smashes them on her body and rumples to the floor. The BAND glories in her collapse. The music crescendos, disintegrates and crossfades to stadium-sized cheers. Hedwig’s body lies motionless. The piano intro to WICKED LITTLE TOWN begins as the glowing word GNOSIS fills the upstage wall ...

HEDWIG rises into new light, a bold silver cross shining on her brow. She has become TOMMY in concert.” (72)

Hedwig’s transformation into Tommy links the two identities through the body of the actor, John Cameron Mitchell.<sup>6</sup> In a way, both Hedwig and Tommy are sharing the same body, and the dramatization of this act is another way in which Hedwig performs disidentification. Even though Hedwig has become Tommy Gnosis, the actor playing these characters has not. When the theatrical audience looks at Mitchell’s transformation, they still see Hedwig within Tommy Gnosis. Therefore, Hedwig disrupts Tommy from within, reversing the narrative interruptions that Tommy’s nearby ampitheatre show has been providing to Hedwig throughout the span of the performance. In this instance, by becoming Tommy Gnosis, Hedwig demonstrates a queer body operating within a normative one. The collapse of characters (Tommy & Hedwig) in the body of a single actor forces the audience to see them as one in the same. Hedwig’s queer body works from within Tommy’s normative body to disrupt that very normativity. Although Hedwig and Tommy cannot share Mitchell’s body at the same time, or be physically doubled like a conjoined twin, it is through this symbolic conjoinment of the two lovers that the play is able to critique the stable categories of self and other, male and female, queer and straight. As Hedwig and Tommy become conjoined, Hedwig passes on their old persona, gifting their iconic wig to Yitzak, which he dons and is then transformed into a new Hedwig. So even as Hedwig the person disidentifies through the body of Tommy Gnosis in their conjoinment, Hedwig as symbolic utopian

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<sup>6</sup> Mitchell performed the role of Hedwig in the original off-Broadway production in 1998 and in the 2001 film. Though I refer to the film as a “twin text” with the stage play, one critical difference is that the film utilizes a second actor (Michael Pitt) to play Tommy Gnosis. However, at the same moment in the narrative, Pitt-as-Tommy dissolves into Mitchell-as-Tommy, stripping off the Hedwig garb, smashing tomatoes on his chest, smearing the gnostic cross on his forehead, and stepping to the microphone to begin vocals on “Wicked Little Town.” Although Hedwig doesn’t disrupt Tommy from within in the film, their presence co-opts his, which still enables a queer body to insert itself into a mainstream space in the film. Though the methods are different within these two mediums (stage and screen), the critical impact remains consistent.

figurehead lives on. By transforming her private persona into public property, she further perpetuates the queerworld. In collapsing Tommy & Hedwig at the climax of the narrative, *Hedwig & the Angry Inch* suggests that queer bodies and queer worlds do not operate counter to heterosexual nationality, but in fact operate within it by disidentifying with spaces, places, and sites of memory.

Conjoined twins are an extremely rare occurrence – an estimated 1 in every 200,000 births. Rarer still is the possibility that conjoined twins survive, as half are stillborn. The rarity of Siamese twins is precisely what lead to their value as sideshow oddities, and launched very lucrative careers for Chang & Eng Bunker and Daisy & Violet Hilton.<sup>7</sup> Most contemporary conjoined twins are either successfully separated or die as a result of a separation surgery in childhood, and the few surviving cases have not captured the imagination as much as the Bunker or Hilton twins did. George & Lori Schappell and Abigail & Brittany Hensel are perhaps the best-known contemporary Siamese twins, due to their regular appearances in entertainment media. The Schappell twins are country singers, and even starred in an episode of Ryan Murphy's plastic surgery series *Nip/Tuck* in which their characters underwent separation surgery which resulted in the death of both twins, necessitating a second post-mortem surgery to repair their conjoined body to its original, ideal state. The Hensel twins were the subject of a 2012 TLC docuseries, *Abby & Brittany*. As dicephalic conjoined twins, Abby & Brittany Hensel are most physiologically like the Twofers of Jackson's novel, but the narrative of their docuseries focuses on their final year at college and transition to gaining employment in early childhood education.

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<sup>7</sup> The Bunker Brothers both left considerable sums of money to their wives and 21 children. The Hilton Sisters, however, fell victim to the demise of the sideshow in the 1940s and were never able to parlay their considerable talents as singers and dancers into commercial success as film stars. They spent the final years of their lives working as grocery store produce clerks in Charlotte, North Carolina. They died on January 4, 1969, broke and alone.

They are depicted as normal, heteronormative young women: interested in seeking boyfriends, working with, caring for, and eventually bearing children.

The Schappell twins, on the other hand, occupy a decidedly queer space. Born Lori and Dori Schappell in 1961, Dori adopted the stage name Reba during her career as a country singer in the 1990s and 2000s. In 2007, Reba Schappell announced that she identified as male and would henceforth be known as George. Though transgender figures are prominent in the history of sideshow, the Schappell twins are the only set of conjoined twins in which one sibling identifies as transgender. George Schappell, in this case, seems like he might feel a particular kinship with Hedwig and their queer embodiment. While Lori Schappell's had several heterosexual partners and was even once engaged to be married, George's personal relationships are less publicly legible. There are no mentions of George's sexual identity or past partnerships, but nonetheless, his transition to male adds further queer complexity to the way in which the Schappell's conjoined body might be read. They are now a rare case in which a male-identified body and a female-identified body are conjoined together, fulfilling the nineteenth century sentimental fantasy of the conjoined body as the ultimate heterosexual romantic ideal, while simultaneously subverting and queering it.

Similarly, the texts discussed in this chapter highlight the queer potential of the Siamese twin that its emblematic use in nineteenth century nationalist frameworks tries to sublimate. When queer writers like Jackson and Mitchell articulate their queer subjects through an image that has been historically tied to national heterosexuality, they reconfigure the conjoined twin not as a synecdoche for the nation, but as a double-headed tool for critique and disidentification. In so doing, these texts perform the work of disidentifying by "recycling and rethinking encoded meaning," producing narratives informed by queer memory (Muñoz 32). The Siamese twins in

*Half-Life* and *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* both offer an embodied vision of queer world-building, as well as a physical form that resists the naming and disciplinary functions of homographesis while also creating a distinct graphic history and identity for queer subjects.

**CHAPTER TWO:**

**FEMINIST FREAKS: PERFORMING GENDER, PRODUCING THE PUBLIC IN *SIGNS*  
*OF LIFE AND GEEK LOVE***

“Oh, I’m just a girl  
 Guess I’m some kind of freak  
 ‘Cause they all sit and stare  
 With their eyes”  
 -- No Doubt, “Just a Girl”

Bernard Pomerance’s 1979 play *The Elephant Man* is perhaps less remembered than the 1980 David Lynch film of the same name, though both capitalize on the cultural interest in Joseph Carey Merrick that permeated the 1970s. Unlike the Lynch film, the theatrical text of Pomerance’s *The Elephant Man* is notable for the way in which it requires Merrick himself to be represented: no makeup, prosthetics, or costuming is to be used to transform the actor into The Elephant Man. Instead, the audience watches the actor contort his body into the positions described by the character of Frederick Treves during an anatomical lecture. As Treves describes Merrick’s “occluded eye,” the actor affects a squint in response. To portray Merrick’s “shapeless” right arm, with a “large and clumsy” hand more like a “fin or paddle” than a hand, the actor’s right arm draws tight to the body and stiffens into disuse (5-6). The convention

heightens the notion that freak is a construct, a social performance put upon bodies or put upon by bodies. It is, in effect, acting. The audience is made keenly aware of the disjuncture between the actor and the freak he is playing, usually by the projection of an image of the real Merrick behind the actor during the transformation scene (*figs. 1 and 2*). However, as the play continues, the visual confirmation of the difference between the actor and the historical Merrick seem to vanish within the performance, solidifying that the actor and the freak are one and the same.



*Figures 1 & 2: Bradley Cooper as The Elephant Man on Broadway in 2014. The beginning of the transformation scene (L). Post-transformation scene (R).*

By aligning the actor's body with the freak's body, Pomerance's play lends Merrick a sense of agency and complicity in his own representation. However, the relationship between performing freakishness and agency is complicated by the play's depiction of actresses. After rescuing Merrick from a nearly deadly street attack, Dr. Frederick Treves takes The Elephant Man under his care at the Royal London Hospital. Noticing that Merrick's appearance has made socializing difficult, Treves enlists the help of stage actress Mrs. Kendal in this endeavor. Treves appeals to Mrs. Kendal that "an actress could help" in the task because "unlike most women, you won't give in, you are trained to hide your true feelings and assume others," implying that her

acting talents will prevent her from running away in fear. In response, Mrs. Kendal quips, “You mean unlike most women I am famous for it, that is really all” (29). Her smart remark compounds some of the reservations the nineteenth century public held about actresses, but also leverages these very problems as a trait essential to the average nineteenth century woman’s performance of her own gender.

As Faye E. Dudden notes in *Women in the American Theatre*, “The actress has been equated with the whore so persistently that no amount of clean living and rectitude among actual performers has ever served to cancel the equation” (2). Dudden further theorizes that the link between acting and sexuality is embodiment. “To act you must be present in the body, available to be seen,” she writes. “The theatrical enterprise thus contains two divergent possibilities for women: transformation and objectification. Theatre may enable women to rehearse the most radical projects of self-creation or may reduce them to bodies and present them as objects” (2). In *Confidence Men and Painted Women*, historian Karen Haltunnen traces these dissembling figures that became cultural villains in nineteenth century America. Con men and painted women, the latter of whom were generally prostitutes or actresses, were frequently charged with the moral corruption of youth in mid-nineteenth century advice manuals, specifically because of their powers of deception. In the sentimental era, where truth and morality were most prized in American culture, any figure perceived as putting on an act was considered morally corrupt. Because the actress misleads her audience into thinking she is something she is not, she remains a “painted woman.” When Mrs. Kendal remarks, “You mean unlike most women I am famous for it,” she suggests that all women participate in the charade of masking their feelings, compounding the suspicion of actresses with a misogynistic suspicion of all women<sup>8</sup>. But her

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<sup>8</sup> Janet Davis also notes that women in audiences were treated with suspicion in the early nineteenth century. She writes, “During the first half of the 19th century, American theatre managers commonly reserved the third tier of

remark also pointedly demonstrates that gender and sex, too, are performances. Painted or not, she proffers, “woman” as a category is intrinsically performative.

Before meeting Merrick, Mrs. Kendal remarks upon The Elephant Man’s appearance: “He reminds me of an audience. I played Cleopatra in Brighton once. All huge grim head and grimace and utterly unable to clap” (28). In this comparison, Mrs. Kendal frames Merrick not only as a receptive vehicle for her performance but as an inversion of his own freakishness. Rather than Merrick being on display for audiences, it is Kendal on display for Merrick, who becomes the massified audience in its entirety. He does not remind her of a member of an audience, but of “an audience” itself. Merrick’s particularity fades in the view of the actress, becoming a member of her adoring public. In this sense, Treves is right about the helpfulness of the actress. By introducing a performer into Merrick’s social world, The Elephant Man has the opportunity to behave as any other member of the public would. By receiving Mrs. Kendal’s performance of social nicety, Merrick assumes a role generally not reserved for freaks, and becomes, through theatrical inversion, a normate audience.

At the end of the scene, Merrick’s position reverts to that of the freak. Treves re-enters with a paper in his hand and proclaims, “You are famous, John. We are in the papers. Look” (34). Both Merrick and Mrs. Kendal are framed via their relationship to their public fame. When Mrs. Kendal calls herself famous, and Treves subsequently applies this fame to Merrick, both figures are aligned through public performance. This inverts Mrs. Kendal’s initial understanding of Merrick as “an audience,” and reframes them *both* as freaks. Merrick, too, makes this observation in his first conversation with Mrs. Kendal:

MERRICK: Well. You are a famous actress.

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seats, or upper gallery, for prostitutes and their customers as a site of sexual exchange,” showing yet another way in which women were considered to be “putting on an act” as they use public spaces for private sexual acts (86).

MRS. KENDAL: I am not unknown.

MERRICK: You must display yourself for your living then. Like I did.

MRS. KENDAL: That is not myself, Mr. Merrick. That is an illusion. This is myself.

MERRICK: This is myself too. (32)

Mrs. Kendal's fame once again precedes her, ensuring that she is understood via her relationship to the public. Merrick's further observations that the actress must display herself like he did further solidifies the relationship between actress and freak. Mrs. Kendal points out that her onstage persona is "an illusion," and that the woman appearing before Merrick is by contrast real. Merrick repeats her affirmation of selfhood, indicating that the man in the room with her is also real and embodied. Their conversation suggests that what parts of themselves they display in order to earn a living are constructions, rather than their authentic selves. Merrick implicitly thinks of the freak shows he once worked in as performances on the same level as Mrs. Kendal's famed stagecraft. It is the performance that makes him a freak, not his body, reiterating Mrs. Kendal's initial observation that based solely on photographs of his body, he reminds her of "an audience" (28).

As her friendship with Merrick develops, she provides him with fancy toiletries, which Treves is quick to point out are utterly useless to Merrick's physical hygiene. Mrs. Kendal, however, insists on their necessity as "props . . . To make himself. As I make me." She goes on to remark that Merrick is "gentle, almost feminine. Cheerful, honest within limits, a serious artist in his way. He is almost like me" (39). Her framing of Merrick as like to herself not only further cements the affinity between the actor and the freak, but also emphasizes the role of cultural "props" in the creation of identities. Both the actress and The Elephant Man are illusions created through props, costumes, and dialogue and they become "freaks" through the repeated

performance of these illusions. More significantly, though, the resonance between the actress and the freak feminizes the position of the freak, and reiterates that if Merrick makes himself, as Mrs. Kendal makes herself, it is through the positioning of their actions as “gentle” and “feminine,” qualities which enable them to be “serious artist[s].”

Mrs. Kendal’s interactions with Merrick point out the fictive dimensions of selfhood, and the ways in which bodies are inscribed by cultural scripts, that are seemingly confirmed by material bodily differences. The collapse of actor and freak (and actress and freak) in Pomerance’s script articulates the performative dimensions of materiality that Judith Butler theorizes in *Bodies That Matter*. Butler claims that “sex” is a regulatory norm which functions in “a performative fashion to constitute the materiality of bodies and, more specifically, to materialize . . . sexual difference in the service of the consolidation of the heterosexual imperative” (2). Drawing a distinction between the “naturalized” characteristics of sex and the socially constructed characteristics of “gender,” Butler reads the material quality of “sex” as a cultural form for the regulation of bodies in the Foucauldian sense, which Margarit Schildrick similarly notes in her work on the biomedical body. Schildrick argues that the biomedical body is a fabrication of discourse which “merely mimics material fixity” because the body itself can never be a closed state. However, the focus on “corporeal raw material” in medical discourse furthers the conceptual split between materiality and discourse (14).

Understanding non-normative bodies as constructions of discourse highlights “freak” as a social construction dependent on the discursive production of material bodies as different from biomedical norms, which have been understood in medical history as both able-bodied and male. Schildrick notes that female bodies display “putative leakiness,” resulting in “the outflow of the body which breaches the boundaries of the proper” in medical literature (17). These bodily

breaches are also addressed in Kristeva's work on abjecta, where she notes the metaphoric resonance of the body's various ejected materials. "Excrement and its equivalents (decay, infection, disease, corpse, etc.) stand for the danger to identify that comes from without: the ego threatened by the non-ego, society threatened by its outside, life by death," she writes, adding that the abject products of female bodies are instead a threat from the inside out, rather than the outside in (Kristeva 71). Ultimately, both Kristeva and Schildrick's readings of the material properties (and products) of female bodies suggest that sexual difference is a threat to the social body, and that this difference itself, is abject.

Sexual difference in Shildrick and Kristeva is formulated primarily through the "naturalized" category of sex, rather than the "performative" category of gender. However, Butler further posits that gender's displacement of sex combines the properties of both categories while simultaneously evacuating them of their meanings, thereby succumbing to a process of desubstantiation. Sex, then, takes on a fictive quality. Yet it is this fiction that delineates the boundaries of what qualifies as the human. Butler suggests that for those who do not appear to be properly gendered, "it is their very humanness that comes into question" because gender operates specifically through exclusion (8). For Butler, matter is "a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter" (9). Performativity, she suggests, is a key part of the process of materialization which both reiterates discursive practices (and therefore naturalizes and crystallizes them), but also opens up the instabilities of such constructions (10).

The structural logic of freak shows combines performativity and theatricality, much in the way that Mrs. Kendal, the famous stage actress, does in *The Elephant Man*. Following the very process of materialization Butler outlines, the display (and performance) of abject(ed)

subjects before a public audience simultaneously solidifies and destabilizes the boundary between the freakish and the normative. This is clear in the name of Merrick's stage persona, The Elephant Man, which implies that he is half-man, half-elephant. Merrick's animal-human hybridity at once assures audiences that they are different from Merrick because they are fully human, while opening up the possibility that they are not. Further, comparing Merrick's deformities to the physical features of an elephant serves a performative function: the comparison reiterates Merrick's less-than-human status, transforming him from Joseph Carey Merrick into The Elephant Man.

Pomerance's play further complicates Merrick's performativity through the convention of the actor-freak. In the scene where the actor playing Merrick morphs his bodily posture into what the audience will come to recognize as that of The Elephant Man, the conflation of the actor and the freak in that moment crystalizes Merrick as a freak, while also demonstrating that it is Treves' anatomical discourse that shapes the actor's body into the freak's body. The work of the actor in this scene is to visualize the effects of discourse, and to effectively be subsumed and controlled by this scene of discursive interpolation throughout the duration of the play. It is a moment in which performativity's dual function becomes clear, reiterating discourse, while also destabilizing it by revealing its discursive properties.

The text's alignment of Mrs. Kendal and Merrick confirms that both the actress and the freak are not only performers in the literal sense, but that their identities are performative. Pomerance's script, therefore, contributes significantly to the understanding of freak as a social construct with respect to anomalous bodies and persons with disabilities. In lending agency, humanity, and performativity to Merrick, the textual world of *The Elephant Man* colors the audience's relationship to him as an empathetic one through which readers and viewers might

find a little of themselves in Merrick as, indeed, most of the characters in the play seem to at one point or another. The text, however, is much less clear about how Mrs. Kendal's freakishness functions. Whereas Merrick's alignment with Mrs. Kendal offers his performative freakishness as power, Mrs. Kendal's alignment with Merrick highlights the ways in which she is powerless and constantly inscribed by discourse, even as a respectable, professional woman. The process ultimately abjects Mrs. Kendal even further, demonstrating Mary Russo's assertion that femininity is "the greatest horror on earth" (93).

This is most notable in Mrs. Kendal's nude scene. As Merrick confesses that he's never seen a "real woman" naked, Mrs. Kendal wonders what he means by the word "real." Merrick asserts that the "ones in the theater" are real, a notion Mrs. Kendal immediately rejects, scoffing, "Surely you can't mean they are more real." Merrick explains that he means the women who attend the theatre and the opera "[i]n the audience" are real because they are ladies who are "kept up" and "respectful" (47). Merrick's comments on the ladies in the audience points toward mass culture as a critical space for women's participation, which M. Alison Kibler argues is a result of the gender symbolism present in mass culture around the turn of the twentieth century. In *Rank Ladies: Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville*, Kibler writes, "The respectability of commercial amusements, including vaudeville and cinema, depended largely on their feminization (although their feminine identity was often duplicitous and ambivalent)." Kibler notes that early critics of mass culture "used femininity to symbolize the passivity and decay" they identified in mass culture, which contributed to a reading of feminized mass culture as "saccharine" rather than "educational and civilized" (12). In Merrick's reading of the ladies who participate in the higher end of mass culture, they are "respectful" and, presumably, "respectable," thus rendering their gendered performance as "real" or, at the very least, idealized.

(Merrick does not think as highly of the women he saw in the audiences at the fairgrounds and carnivals.) The conflation of the real and the ideal in Merrick's mind further thematizes performativity as a process of materialization in *The Elephant Man*, and sets the stage for Mrs. Kendal attempt to question these processes by stripping them down:

MRS. KENDAL: Turn around a moment. Don't look.

MERRICK: Is this a game?

MRS. KENDAL: I would not call it a game. A surprise. (*She begins undressing.*)

MERRICK: What kind of a surprise?

MRS. KENDAL: I saw photographs of you. Before I met you. You didn't know that, did you?

MERRICK: The ones from the first time, in '84? No, I didn't.

MRS. KENDAL: I felt it was – unjust. I don't know why. I cannot say my sense of justice is my most highly developed characteristic. You may turn around again. Well. A little funny, isn't it?

MERRICK: It is the most beautiful sight I have ever seen. Ever.

MRS. KENDAL: If you tell anyone, I shall not see you again, we shall not read, we shall not talk, we shall do nothing. Wait. (*Undoes her hair.*) There. No illusions. Now. Well?

What is there to say? "I am extremely pleased to have made your acquaintance?" (46-49)

By declaring her naked form free from illusions, Mrs. Kendal's points toward femininity as a constructed performance. She, too, emphasizes her material body as "real," but in so doing calls attention to the ways in which discourse shapes her material reality. Without the "costume" of a proper lady, she falls back on the social script required of a respectable lady - one which she diligently practiced when she is first introduced in the play. The use of quotation marks around

the phrase “I am extremely pleased to have made your acquaintance” emphasizes the expression as a line from a script, which in conjunction with earlier scenes reveals itself to be a social script delineating proper etiquette. The disjunction between the supposed naturalness of Mrs. Kendal’s body and the unnaturalness of her scripted utterance highlights the fact that both her material body and her social discourse are equally constructed, and that this polite, social discourse frames the way in which others are meant to respond to Mrs. Kendal’s bare body.

Treves once again enters the scene and interrupts Mrs. Kendal’s display. He responds by decrying the actress’s sense of propriety. “But – have you no sense of decency?” Treves queries. “Woman, dress yourself quickly,” he proclaims. As Mrs. Kendal reclothes herself, Treves turns to Merrick to chastise him for looking. “Are you not ashamed?” Treves continues. “Do you know what you are? Don’t you know what is forbidden?” (50). There are several valences to Treves’s questions of Merrick. “Do you know what you are?” serves to remind Merrick of his place as a freak, not an audience for Mrs. Kendal and therefore a normal man, and certainly not a possible lover. Treves implies that sex is the “forbidden” outcome of a woman undressing before a man, and that Merrick should be ashamed for even passively participating in such a situation. In addition to the moral (and eugenic) problem of the spectre of sex between the actress and The Elephant Man, Treves’s frustrated queries also imply that it is Merrick’s very passivity in the situation that is the “forbidden” thing about which he should feel ashamed. In this case, Merrick’s passive reception of Mrs. Kendal’s action recalls the feminized treatment of mass culture audiences. The reprimand “Do you know what you are?” then becomes a question about gender, a reminder that Merrick is The Elephant Man, and not “The Elephant Woman.”

After Mrs. Kendal makes her exit, she also exits the text, not to be seen again until curtain call. Mrs. Kendal’s indecent display of her material body is a charged moment, in which

her attempt to be free from the illusions of both performativity and propriety is punished both by Treves – the voice in the play which best represents biomedical norms – and the playwright.

Although Merrick is reprimanded for looking, it is the actress who disappears from the text. By asserting her materiality in an attempt to strip down discourse, she becomes written over by it and written out by it. Mrs. Kendal's disappearance makes clear Butler's point: that materiality itself is crystalized by the repetition of discourse, and that materiality is an unstable construction.

The matter with Mrs. Kendal, however, has everything to do with how much her performative gender and her material body enfreak her. Treves's response to Mrs. Kendal's nude display frames the act as an inappropriate gender performance, and therefore marks it as an attempt at subversion and agency. That Mrs. Kendal is a professional actress is germane. As an actress, she is what Faye E. Dudden terms "a woman in public," which she characterizes as a problem for nineteenth century society because "a woman in public, on the street and in the workplace is the same as the problem of a woman on the stage: she must be there in the body" (3). Being "in the body" carries with it "the risk of being taken as a sexual object against one's will," Dudden continues, calling the overall problem for women in public "the body problem" (3). Actresses must always be present in their bodies, and so their materiality is charged with potential. Mrs. Kendal's nude scene suggests that the potentiality of her body is present at all times – even when she is not technically acting, as she claims to not be when she disrobes for Merrick. In *Women in the American Theatre*, Faye E. Dudden suggests that the sheer visibility of actresses appearing in public spaces allowed women *in the audience* "to imagine new ways of acting and being" (3). Mrs. Kendal's nudity, then, stands in defiance of social propriety and gendered expectations for nineteenth century women. And even though her material presence is

then written out of the text when she is told to cover up, her action continues to resonate for her audience, Merrick, who stands in for “feminized” mass culture.

The idea of Mrs. Kendal’s nude body remains charged in the play, even when she isn’t onstage. In a later scene, Merrick pointedly ask Treves about the conventions which frame nudity as a moral problem:

MERRICK: Did you see her? Naked?

TREVES: When I was operating. Of course –

MERRICK: Oh.

TREVES: Oh what?

MERRICK: Is it okay to see them naked if you cut them up afterwards? (56)

Merrick’s questions highlight the distinction between nudity for “educated” purposes, such as scientific study or surgical intervention, and all other forms of nudity, and critique the arbitrary nature thereof. By collapsing the binary between what one might call “high” nudity and “low” nudity, Merrick destabilizes Treves’s moral high ground, and furthers the impact of Mrs. Kendal’s action. Though her material body does not return to the play, her defiant display lingers in the text, making her body into something that not only “breaches the boundaries of the proper” in its nude display, but something which continues to threaten the stable world of the text (and certainly Treves’s stable world) from the inside out. Her abject position within the text, however, endows Mrs. Kendal with subversive power – a special freakishness that effects the world of the play, even as her body is written out of it.

The performance of nudity, then, is a critical tool for female freaks. It functions as a defiant use of materiality that can disrupt the discursive constructions that render women powerless, and transforms female freaks into feminist freaks. Building on my discussion of the

role of the actress in *The Elephant Man*, this chapter explores the “freakishness” of female bodies and sexuality. I illustrate the social practices which regulate female bodies on both material and discursive levels, and articulate how these concerns are reworked in Joan Schenkar’s *Signs of Life* and Katherine Dunn’s *Geek Love*, where female freaks use their material bodies to resignify patriarchal discourses through performance. Scenes of performance function within these texts to highlight the performative dimensions of sex and gender, and serve as the critical resources through which these female freaks leverage matter as feminist practice to remake public spaces.

Janet Davis’s research on circus history demonstrates how the progressive politics of the early twentieth century’s “new woman” were incorporated under the big top. Equestriennes and other circus women were marketed as a “novel and picturesque exhibition of the assertion of the rights of the twentieth-century girl” and these “New Woman numbers” as they were called “erased corporeal boundaries between the sexes” (82). Davis also notes that the circus “was a comfortable space for women who felt alienated by social norms” (83). The athleticism of many big top circus arts (equestrianism, aerialists, gymnasts, etc.) demonstrated that women’s physical abilities were just as impressive as men’s, while the sideshow reconfigured the boundaries between the sexes through gender play (half-n-half acts, bearded ladies, etc.).

Nudity, or near nudity, was another a key element in the presentation of “New Woman” acts: eschewing the reform dress of the era, circus women wore short skirts, nearly sleeveless tops, sheer tights, and a number of other costumes that would have been considered barely-there for the 1890s. Davis goes on to argue that the circus as a business was hyper aware of the transgressive nature of female bodies being both active and nearly nude, and that this produced two readings of nudity: that which is respectable, and that which is not. “Purity reformers and

audiences both frequently thought that all female entertainers were prostitutes because they exposed their bodies for pay,” Davis writes, noting that circus women and actresses were often made respectable through “sentimental discourses of domesticity” which neutralized the sexual presence of these women (86, 93). Circus women were made respectable through connections to old, European circus families, where their presence within the context of the circus was explained by their lineage. Their press stories emphasized traveling with family, narratives of class and education, and generally billed them as engaged if they were unmarried. Yet, even within these narratives of respectability, circus women’s “constant jostling on the trapeze, high wire, or horse provided audiences with constant opportunities to ‘peek’ underneath her skirts. The gowning campaign kept audiences guessing about what the circus woman really wore, creating anticipation for a potential striptease: Would she be fully dressed or not? Or might she actually undress in front of the circus audience?” (108-109).

The tight clothing of circus women hinted at the prospect of nudity, illustrating the transgressive nature of the circus performer’s body even through the veil of respectability. Likewise, female freaks were frequently presented in ways that highlighted their domestic and respectable nature. As Davis notes, “Press agents hinted at the possibility of sexual activity through the conventional trope of marriage,” in which oppositional pairings of fat ladies and skeleton men or dwarves and giants became standard presentational modes. “[M]arriages of this kind in all likelihood enabled audiences to imagine the Fat Lady in sexual situations, particularly with the willowy Skeleton man, whom she might crush to death during sexual intercourse,” Davis writes (120). Once again, respectability becomes a tool through which female freaks ironically made their sexual lives visible.

The interplay of the respectable and the sexual (and the seeming incompatibility of the two) in both circuses and sideshows yields further examination of the larger social concerns about women's increasing visibility in public spaces at the turn of the twentieth century. Janet Davis traces the evolution of labor economies throughout the nineteenth century to illustrate how the shift away from home-based production created new social mobility and economic vitality for women (both bourgeois and poor), as well as troubled the Victorian doctrine of separate spheres. "Circus women's heightened presence occurred just as more women were participating in paid labor and public activism," Davis notes, highlighting that visibility in popular culture maps on to ideological shifts in the makeup of public spaces. It is important to note here that these representations of circus women (both freaks and other skilled performers) were highly constructed by press agents, managers, and showrunners, leaving little agency to the performers themselves in how they wished to present themselves to the public. Nonetheless, the interplay of respectability and nudity that occurred under the big top assisted these women, especially female freaks, in crafting long, economically lucrative careers that both depended upon their physical difference and physical skill, as well as the performance thereof.

Bodily difference is integral to circuses and carnivals, and to the ways in which these public entertainments rework the private body as a public concern. In his 1965 analysis of the carnivalesque in *Rabelais and His World*, Mikhail Bakhtin theorizes that the "the grotesque body is . . . unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits," so much so that it emphasizes the body's "apertures or convexities . . . the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose" (26). Stallybrass and White later apply this notion to their readings of early twentieth century psychoanalytic case studies of hysteria in their chapter "Bourgeois Hysteria and the Carnavalesque," where they argue that the appearance of circus and carnival

imagery within the case studies uses the very language the bourgeois social class was meant to distinguish itself from, demonstrating an appropriation of that which was once disavowed. They read hysteria as re-enacting the ritual battle of Carnival and Lent that Bakhtin describes, and hysteria itself as a symptom of the failure to mediate the carnivalesque body in everyday life “except by violent acts of exclusion” (184). Here Stallybrass and White read hysteria as a ritualistic inversion of top and bottom, of politeness and grotesqueness, in which the “terrors and pleasures associated with the lower half of the body are registered as displaced symptoms in the top half” (185). They conclude that this was a particular problem for female hysterics, as “respectable women” were not supposed to have access to “symbolic articulations of the lower body” (185). In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault takes issue with the very naming of sexuality as an indecent domain, which he argues is the fallacy of the repressive hypothesis. Rather, as the rich discussion of psychoanalytic case studies through Bakhtin proves, repression actually creates a discourse around sexuality, and this discourse becomes a regulatory technique for the middle class body. “Between the state and the individual,” Foucault writes, “sex became an issue and a public issue no less; a whole web of discourses, special knowledges, analyses, and injunctions settled down upon it (26).

Mary Russo’s 1994 study *The Female Grotesque* briefly intervenes in this conversation. She notes, “Hysterics and madwomen generally have ended up in the attic or in the asylum, their gestures of pain and defiance having served only to put them out of circulation” (67). Here, Russo suggests that female expression (of pain, of defiance, of the carnivalesque pleasures of the lower body) has historically been removed from public view and placed within the private confines of the institution (or the most remote spaces of the home). Yet, she also implies that the expression of hysteria can be read as “a model of performance not unlike the fashionable

histrionics of great Romantic actresses and circus artists of the late nineteenth century. These paid performers were, like women hysterics ‘seen but not heard,’ in one sense, since the scene of their livelihood, their context, it can be argued, was arranged by and for the male viewer. Nonetheless, they used their bodies in public, in extravagant ways that could have only provoked wonder and ambivalence in the female viewer, as such latitude of movement and attitude was not permitted most women without negative consequences” (68). Russo’s reading of hysteria critiques Stallybrass and White’s; her work reveals that overabundant female sexuality is medicalized as non-normative, and that the proper female body is restrained in feeling and sensation (and is middle-class and white, as Stallybrass and White infer). But Russo’s work also suggests that performance offers the critical potential to recognize the historical oppression of women, and to do so by leveraging the relationship between performance and public production.

If performance makes public that which is meant to be private and restrained, then Mrs. Kendal’s nude performance for Merrick is transgressive on multiple levels. Not only does her naked body configure Merrick as a member of a normative public audience, but also clearly defies any sense of public propriety for nineteenth century women. However, in the context of Stallybrass and White’s discussion of hysteria vis a vis Russo, Mrs. Kendal’s disappearance from *The Elephant Man* following her nude scene is even more significant. The scholarship on female performance in the nineteenth century articulated by Kibler, Dudden, Davis and others hinges on public display and public action, yet while Merrick makes up the public for Mrs. Kendal, their performative interactions take place in private – not on a stage, but inside the institution of the Royal London Hospital where Merrick lived out the last years of his life. That Mrs. Kendal’s nudity occurs within a private institution, and that it is condemned by Treves further contextualizes her actions as those of an hysterical woman. Her actions are indeed not unlike the

“great Romantic actresses” because she herself is an actress, but her ability to act – and to act in ways that are considered unfeminine – also brands her as an hysteric. Her disappearance from the text then becomes a symbolic disappearance into the setting of the hospital, replicating the Victorian impulse to regulate non-normative displays of femininity via institutionalization. Mrs. Kendal’s attempt to strip down discourse therefore results in her disappearance from public view, denying her performance the power Russo suggests it may otherwise have to produce new public relationships.

In her 1979 play *Signs of Life*, Joan Schenkar imagines a feminist revision of the story of The Elephant Man by linking the fictional history of Elephant Woman, Jane Merritt, to the personal history of Alice James, the younger sister of novelist Henry James and psychologist William James. Schenkar uses the historical context of the late nineteenth century to make visible the normative structures which regulate women’s bodies and sexuality. By linking the characters of Jane Merritt and Alice James through freak show and carnival imagery, Schenkar proposes the emergent science of psychoanalysis as a technology of female enfreakment, and imagines the relationship between female performance and public production as an arena through which qualities of freakishness are created and transformed.

The play employs the voices of its male characters, whose public personas are demarcated by their professional statuses, to espouse the norms against which the play’s female freaks are measured. Henry James complains that his sister Alice has “spent twenty years in bed and produced nothing more than a cancer of the breast. If that isn’t freakish . . .”, while Jane Merritt’s doctor replies, “And my poor freak, Jane Merritt . . . In her twenty years, I suppose you could say she produced nothing more than me” (52). Henry’s line suggests that Alice’s freakishness is her lack of reproduction, as “twenty years in bed” implies a bawdy joke about

what women are meant to do in bed (i.e. reproduce), while Jane's doctor denies her any possibility of reproductive potential, except by expanding the discourse of science and, therefore, his career. Both women's productive capabilities are undercut by reducing or denying their potential to produce. The emphasis on female production – specifically, a lack thereof – stands in contrast to P.T. Barnum's<sup>9</sup> proclamations about production in which he declares, "The name P.T. Barnum does not produce dead houses, my dear" (63). For Barnum and the other male characters in the play, producing is a public creative act, resulting in the distribution of entertainment, literature, or scientific knowledge. Barnum's production is constructed as lively (rather than dead), and thus links production to vitality. The life of a proper subject is one that is publicly creative, in so much as it either creates for the public (Henry's writing or the Doctor's contributions to scientific knowledge), or creates publics (Barnum's audiences). By figuring women's production as private and reproductive, Jane and Alice are denied access to the public sphere. But by not producing anything at all, they become especially freakish in their failure to "act" as proper women.

But although the female freaks in *Signs of Life* do not produce according to societal norms, they do perform their freakishness, and thereby produce possibilities for women in public. By framing these female freaks as performers, Schenkar endows them with the agency of stage actresses, circus performers, and other women in public whose talents as performers seem to allow at least temporary transgression of social mores. Alice's doctor laments, in fact, that she never became a stage actress. "She had a genius for the well-timed disease. A real genius," he says, "What a performer she would have made" (51). But Alice already understands herself, and

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<sup>9</sup> Though Schenkar's play relies on the diaries of Alice James to construct her history, it seems that most of Jane Merritt's history as The Elephant Woman is fabricated. Although there are several concordances with the life of Joseph Carey Merrick, The Elephant Man, P.T. Barnum was not one of them. He and Merrick never worked together, nor did they ever met.

her disease, to be a kind of performance. She describes her tendency to cut herself with her brother's shaving kit as a ritual in which "[E]very morning for months after that I would walk into Harry's bathroom and repeat the same performance" (68). Alice also describes her fits of hysteria in public spaces as real "showstoppers," revealing that Alice, like the romantic actresses Russo compares to hysterics, is performing her (non-normative) femininity as freakish public spectacle (73). Alice's public "showstoppers" and the genius of a "well-timed disease" construct her illness not as hysteria, but as a dimension of how she performs her gender identity and materializes the very discourses of female freakishness through these performances. Both Alice and the men who observe her use the language of the theatre to describe her inappropriate public actions, recalling the nineteenth century sentiments about actresses and the potential dangers of the public performances. Within *Signs of Life*, the audience never gets to see Alice perform in this way, however, as she spends her scenes confined to her bed. Like Mrs. Kendal, Alice's proclivities for acting out in public spaces reinforce her confinement, therefore limiting her public productive potential.

Jane Merritt is instructed in how to "look" like a freak from the warden at her workhouse, who reveals that being a freak is not an embodied quality, but a skilled performance that Jane must manipulate (58):

Now the first thing you want to learn in this class is HOW TO LOOK. You bettah know you all look real disgusting. Ready now? The lesson is HOW TO LOOK. Look to the side. Keep your head straight. Not up un the air. When you look to the side see what's there. Just see what's there. To the side, to the side, to the side. (*JANE looks down.*) In a freak class there's no reason to look down. Everybody in the world already down on you. Just look to the side and see. See. See that bastard sneakin' up on you. See his knife. Be

AWARE. See that nice lady gon' give you some money. See her look. She just waiting t' see you smile. Limp on up to her now and hold out your hand. Good. Look to the side, to the side, to the side, to the side. See. In a freak class you got to be awake. You in training for your life. If you're real lucky, one a them carnivals yo' Mama was talking about might pick up on you. . .

The last thing you got to learn in this class is how to laugh accordin' to an audience. Most a you gonna end up bein' looked at by a lot a people, and you got to learn to laugh real big so people think you're happy. Nobody's gonna pay to see you if you can't be happy for 'em. (58).

Jane's warden emphasizes the work of seeing and being seen as part of the performance of freakishness. By instructing Jane in the "rules" of how to be a freak, she points out how visual confirmation of social norms create material effects. If Jane performs in just this way, people will see her as a freak, and therefore reward her financially for that performance. However, the warden's understanding of the performative dimensions of freakishness offer some agency within this stylized repetition of looks and gazes. These are not rules to be followed unconsciously, but rules Jane must repeat and learn if she is to be successful as a freak performer. The warden's rules very specifically apply to the public-facing dimensions of Jane's freakish embodiment. There are no rules for how she might act in private, revealing that freakishness is itself a public construction, therefore troubling the play's emphasis on the privatization of female bodies. By being a freak performer, and manipulating her own gaze to attract the gaze of others, Jane Merritt invites herself into public spaces by performing in these expected ways.

Schenkar's female freaks are constructed as performers, as active agents and actors, in their own presentation, allowing them to contest social norms by inserting themselves, perhaps inappropriately as Alice James does, into public spaces. The performance of freakishness remakes the public space on its own terms, in these cases, and in doing so inserts the freak's right to exist as a part of the public – a public that routinely and passively consumes the bodies of female performers (and female freaks), and is simultaneously feminized in that passivity. Freakishness for these women becomes a form of creative production. Asserting themselves by performing in public, they break down the boundary between public and private, rendering public space as feminine space.

To be a woman in public in the nineteenth century was a transgressive act, carrying with it the stigma of what Mary Douglas would call “matter out of place” (44). Out of place, Mrs. Kendall, Alice James, and Jane Merritt are all rendered abject, and harness their abjection to threaten the symbolic social order. However, in each case, the female freak is removed from the text. Mrs. Kendall disappears from the narrative following her nude display, and Jane and Alice both die at the end of *Signs of Life*. The Doctor autopsies Jane onstage, proclaiming, “Alive, you were a wonder. Dead, you're miraculous!” (90). Alice's funeral happens offstage, but is described by the doctor as “her last public performance” (91). *Signs of Life* presents its female freaks as performing to the very end of their lives, and even beyond. Jane transforms from a wonder to a miracle in her death, which both recapitulates premodern conceptions of the freak as miraculous. In her “miraculous” state of death, she loses her agency and subjectivity and fully becomes the object of scientific discourse. Likewise, Alice, too, becomes overwritten by discourse. Her death and the “public performance” of her funeral happen offstage, allowing the male voices of the text to speak about her, just as they do to Jane and to Mrs. Kendall in *The*

*Elephant Man*. Perhaps because these texts are grounded in the historical world of the nineteenth century, the impulse to be “historically accurate” in some ways denies the characters the ability to truly harness the power of their performance practices. While each actress makes strides to become a woman in public, and therefore resignify the cultural boundaries and social mores that inform proper femininity, they are ultimately subsumed by these discourses at the end of their respective plays.

The power of the material body as a performative tool is taken up more productively in Katherine Dunn’s 1982 novel, *Geek Love*, whose narrator, Olympia, recognizes the power of being a disabled woman in public. “Just being visible is my biggest confession,” she observes, noting at once that her visibly disabled body always precedes anything she might have to say about herself, as well as how the presence of her material body forms the basis for interaction with others. Because of her hunchback, dwarfism, and albinism, “[p]eople talk easily to me . . . My worst is all out in the open. It makes it necessary for people to tell you about themselves . . . they try to set me at easy by revealing our equality, by dragging out their own less-apparent deformities” (156). The way patrons at bars respond to Olympia suggests that the presence of her body in public spaces is an incitement to discourse. She is a subject who strikes up conversation about bodies and materiality, although often at the cost of Olympia’s ability to narrate her own body. “They go too far,” she notes, “because I am one listener who is no position to judge or find fault” (156). At the bar, Olympia’s presence seemingly affords her power over a space, yet that power is also mitigated by her normative interlocutor’s use of her body to perform the affective labor of listening. Although the patrons who chat with her ostensibly wish to erase the boundary of physical difference between themselves and Oly, the ensuing conversations about their

material bodies also subtly reinforce the power of the visibly normative body over the visibly non-normative one.

*Geek Love* suggests that it is through performance that Olympia and the other members of the Binewski Carnival Fabulon (and their descendants) can engage in the creative production of new public forms. Though this is perhaps most notable in Arty's cult of limb-shedding religious zealots, who seek peace, isolation, and purity by transforming their once-able bodies into forms that resemble those of their phocomelia-afflicted leader, I am more interested in the novel's female performers and the ways in which they make their bodies public, particularly through the performance of nudity. In both *Signs of Life* and *The Elephant Man*, the performing female body is constructed as freakish because of its ability to "act" either properly or improperly. Acting as a proper female subject, in these cases, means to exist within the bounds of normative Victorian femininity: clothed, restrained, and private.

*Signs of Life* takes up the private and restrained dimensions of this propriety most significantly: while the women's naked, material bodies are frequently referred to, there are no scenes in which the women's bodies appear in all their fleshy abjection before the audience. After *The Elephant Woman's* death and offstage autopsy, her doctor speculates on the power and productive potential of her unclothed body. "Ah, but she was amorous. Yes, Mr. James, Jane was amorous," he declares. "She would have liked to have been a lover. The signs were unmistakable. I saw great significance in the fact that the skin of her vulva was virtually the only area of her body untouched by the disorder" (91). Though *The Elephant Man* debuted a year after *Signs of Life*, Schenkar's play seems to respond to Merrick and Treves's discussion about why it's okay "to see them naked if you cut them up afterwards" (56). The line at once echoes

Merrick's critique of the discursive rules of science, while also reiterating a conversation Mrs. Kendal and Treves have about Merrick's own anatomy:

MRS. KENDAL: I could not help but noticing from the photographs that—well—of the unafflicted parts—ah, how shall I put it? (*Points to photograph.*)

TREVES: Oh. I see! I quite. Understand. No, no, no, it is quite normal.

MRS. KENDAL: I thought as much.

TREVES: Medically speaking, uhm, you see the papillomatous extrusions which disfigure hum, uhm, seem to correspond quite regularly to the osseous deformities, that is, excuse me, there is a link between the bone disorder and the skin growths, though for the life of me I have not discovered what it is or why it is, but in any case this—part—it would be therefore unlikely to be afflicted because well, that is, well, there's no bone in it. None at all. I mean.

MRS. KENDAL: Well. Learn a little every day don't we?

TREVES: I am horribly embarrassed.

MRS. KENDAL: Are you? Then he must be lonely indeed. (30)

Mrs. Kendal once again wryly points out the limits scientific discourse (and its embodiment, Frederick Treves) have placed on Merrick's humanity, and, specifically, his masculinity. But on the contrary, the line in *Signs of Life* regarding Jane Merritt's vulva, "untouched by the disorder," suggests that it is less her disorder, disability, or disease that enfreaks her, and more the material presence of her secondary sex characteristics. Her doctors read *The Elephant Woman* as sexually viable and sexually available because of the utter normativity of her genitals, and see "great significance" in them. This "significance" reads as a patriarchal reinforcement of her gender role within the world of the text, as well as affording her the possibility that she might be productive

within the demands of the patriarchy: that she might be “amorous” or that she “would have liked to have been a lover,” presumably without reproductive intent. This prospect is raised as a freakish possibility by her doctor, and deemed “revoltingly unnecessary” and “a disgusting piece of work” by Henry James (91). Henry’s concerns further suggest that “creative production” for women is only acceptable when the products of creation are offspring, as well as reinforcing that deviance from this norm in even minute ways is freakish. While neither the Elephant Man nor the Elephant Woman have much say in how the scientific enterprises of their respective texts interpret the possibilities of their sexuality, comparing the two reveals that there are different discursive conditions that produce material differences between them, making Merrick’s sexuality seem normative, where Merritt’s is freakish, although both possess “normal” genitalia.

Because these body-centered discourses crystalize difference, the body itself can become a tool through which to transgress or destabilize gender norms. In *Feminist & Queer Performance: Critical Strategies*, Sue-Ellen Case articulates how the material concerns of embodiment were taken up in feminist performance art in the mid-twentieth century. “Bodily practices and modes of self-representation were perceived as coded,” she writes, noting that fashion, movement, and proxemics “constituted either a patriarchal inheritance, or a new feminist ‘consciousness.’” Performance art at the time chose to viscerally and visibly take up these concerns, wherein “[t]he body—particularly the nude body—became a site of political and representational change.” The emphasis on materiality offered naked female bodies as “a demand for change and a portrait of a given condition of social oppression” (106). Jill Dolan suggests the contrary. In *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, Dolan suggests that the use of nudity in performance further entrenches women’s positions as objects of the gaze, reinforcing ingrained patriarchal ways of thinking and seeing. Her critique rests on the performer’s lack of

agency, and the audience's total control over the performer through the act of gazing. In doing so, Dolan's reading of nude performance treats live textual experiences like cinematic ones. Laura Mulvey has fruitfully argued that the genre of cinema replicates the male gaze, often by visually fragmenting women's bodies, or panning up or across actress's bodies in ways that provide scopophilic pleasure to a male viewer. However, live performance is fundamentally different than a performance captured on film. The viewer's eyes are free to look anywhere, but are most clearly directed by the movements of the performer, not by a framing device. As such, the use of nudity in performance may be viewed as further objectification, but it can also transform and work through these structures to destabilize them.

In *The Happy Stripper: The Pleasures and Politics of the New Burlesque*, Jacki Wilson contrasts nakedness and nudity within artistic representation. Drawing on Kenneth Clark and Lydia Nead, she offers nakedness as "women's erotic expression as sexual subjects," which opposes the nude as an idealized representation of the female body, crafted into perfection by the fine hand of a (male) artist. Nakedness, therefore, could be contained within the nude, "veiled by convention and stigma, or condemned as immoral and assigned to a promiscuous, whorish working-class other" (Wilson 50). Naked female bodies were charged with connections to class, capital, and sexual deviance. Case's use of "nude" to describe feminist performance art both does the work of elevating female nakedness from its lowbrow associations, while simultaneously placing the women who perform these nude acts in the role the artist, crafting the naked body into a controlled, perfected nude form. However, in much of the work both Case and Wilson discuss, the "nude" forms taken up by feminist performance art rarely resembles the type of artistic perfection associated with nudes. This defiance of male-driven conventions of artistic representation strives to resignify the effects of discourse through its focus on the material body,

combining the naked and the nude. For that reason, I will use both “naked” and “nude” throughout this chapter to show the fungibility of these terms within the texts I read.

The performing body stands at the center of Dunn’s *Geek Love*, as the Binewski children were quite literally bred to become performers. Each Binewski child’s unique embodiment makes them especially suited to sideshow performances of various kinds, though it is not their bodies alone that constitute the performance. Each one carefully crafts the work they put on stage at the Binewski Carnival Fabulon, from Arty’s increasingly spectacular aqua shows, to Elly and Iphy’s prodigious piano playing, to Olympia’s studied articulations as she takes on the role of the barker – a name she bestows on her daughter, Miranda, to disguise her Binewski bloodline. But as Oly watches her daughter from afar, she notices her “preoccup[ation] with deformity” and surmises that there may be “some hooked structure in her cells that twists her toward what the world calls freakish” (Dunn 15). Miranda not only spends her time studying to be an anatomical illustrator, through which her mother re-enters her life as the subject of one of her portraiture studies, but also makes her living dancing at the Glass House, a Portland strip club populated by ecdysiasts with “specialties.” At the Glass House, women with unique embodiments take the stage in their own striptease-driven freak show. From Denise, the dancer sporting floor-length hair and knee-length pubic hair, to Paulette a pre-op (or possibly non-op) transwoman, to Miranda herself, whose Binewski bloodline has gifted her with a “thin, curling tail that jutted out from the end of her spine and bounced just above her round buttocks” (17).

In *Strip Show: Performances of Gender and Desire*, Katherine Liepe-Levinson constructs a genre analysis of nightclub strip shows, arguing for the ways in which striptease events perform complex reversals of social norms. Her analysis demonstrates how the narrative scheme of strip shows appears to enable men to “pay women to perform ‘sexual acts’ – to play what is

commonly called the ‘sex-object’ role,” and that the dramatic and sartorial design of these shows (where male spectators are clothed, but female performers are nude) suggests “the cultural and physical vulnerability and accessibility of women to men” (9). Under this schema, women are “equated as a class with ‘the goods’ – as things or objects to be looked at, desired and traded to shore up relations between men” (10). The continued economic exchange of goods and services within the economy of the striptease show subsequently drives up the desire to purchase more and more goods, thereby maintaining “the power of the privileged classes by ensuring the passivity and alienation of the subservient classes upon which capitalism also depends” (10-11).

However, Liepe-Levinson also contends that exotic dance also works on and through these power systems in a spiral, offering “a series of confrontations or “swerves in the scene” that eventually expand on the original design.” Drawing on Ann McClintock’s formulation, she posits that striptease is charged not simply because the dancers perform “sexually suggestive movements in the nude,” but because their routines “theatrically ‘go somewhere’ – from dressed to undressed, from sexual flirting to full-blown ‘I’m going to die’ desire, from desire to mimetic or ‘real’ sexual satisfaction. The traditional structure of the strip act further highlights the spectators’ part in the show by incrementally increasing their roles as transgressive ‘peepers’ – which then likewise highlights the spiral-like effects and transformations of the spectators’ own bodies as they become sexually aroused” (158). By reading striptease as a narrative form that harnesses the power of transitional states, Liepe-Levinson’s work illuminates how the performance of nudity – even within commercial contexts – can destabilize norms.

If, as Mary Russo supposes, femininity is “the greatest horror on Earth,” then it is useful to consider Linda Williams’s linkage of the woman and the monster alongside Liepe-Levinson’s work on striptease. Williams suggests that because they are both objects of scopophilic vision,

the woman and the monster share a special affinity. Following the psychoanalytic tradition, Case adds: “The monster’s power is one of sexual difference from the normal male; thus the monster functions like woman in representing the threat of castration” (76). The Glass House solidifies this linkage of woman and monster as object of the scopophilic gaze, but also imbues it with a symbolic threat. By employing women with deliberately monstrous qualities, the Glass House itself may be marketed as a space to explore fetishistic desire – and indeed it is, as evidenced in Miranda’s description of the “Exotic Features” in the club’s back room<sup>10</sup> (31). But in doing so, the club includes bodies that threaten the symbolic order, who negotiate the fetishistic frameworks of their work environment to perform visible, sexualized labor that leverages the capacity of their material embodiments. If strip clubs offer the possibility of transgression, the freak show stripteases at the Glass House redouble these efforts, and imbue erotic performance with critical possibility.

The critical possibilities of sex work in its many forms are much debated in feminist discourse, and even Olympia shows some ambivalence toward her daughter’s participation in the Glass House shows. When her daughter first appears onstage, she both takes pride in Miranda, and recognizes the power of her embodiment. “She came out in long white satin. . . Miranda with the Binewski cheekbones, the Mongol eyes. Wide-mouthed Miranda, the dancer on long legs. The chill wash of joy hit me: my daughter. She was good. Not great, but good. What’s bred in the bones, when you have bones, comes through,” Oly observes, making note of her daughter’s

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<sup>10</sup> Miranda explains, “[T]he dancers, all of us, aren’t there for our dancing skills or even our looks, but . . . because we each have something odd. We call them our specialties. What the Glass House calls ‘Exotic Features’ are all in the back room. You know. Separate cover charges for private shows and private parties. Blondes with Dobermans. Group acts. They stage requests, too, for fancy prices. There are one-way mirrors in the peeper booths and special insurance policies for domination or S&M. That’s where the girls make money. The club too.” (31) The name of the club suggests that the fetishistic desires of its clients makes them also “freaks” in the sexual sense, and that this mutual desire for the freakish makes the Glass House a safe, sex-positive space. Those in glass houses, it implies, shouldn’t throw stones.

physicality. The suggestion that Miranda's body is "bred in the bones" offers her talent for dancing as inherited from the Binewski line, as well as comments on how viscerally her work is tied to her material body. This cuts both ways, as Oly's recognition of Miranda's skillfulness is immediately paired with an observation about how the audience looks at her, wanting "to squirt her full of baby juice" (17). Miranda's skill as a performer is reduced from agency to objectification in her mother's eyes, aligning her reading of the nude (or near-nude) performance with critics like Jill Dolan.

This critical juncture between agent and object sullies the performance for Oly, leading to her subsequent critique of the limits of Miranda's innate talents. "Though I am her mother, I knew that Miranda's little act, her clever little strip with its dignity and timing was paltry compared to the skill and power I had watched in my other loved ones," she narrates. "But it was strange and different to me, watching these people watching her. Because they thought she was pretty, because they thought it would be good to grab her ass and pump jizz into her. Their bodies lifted up, clean and simple to her in the clear, unconscious awareness of each of their cells' sensing that she would grunt out strong young" (17). Oly is unable to see the generic similarities between the work her siblings performed in the Binewski Carnival Fabulon and the work her daughter performs at the Glass House, noting how "strange and different" it is. The overtly sexual nature of the performance prevents Oly from seeing it as hinging on the same dynamics of the freak show. Her reading suggests that because Miranda's body passes for one that could unquestionably occupy the core of patriarchal fantasy, and that while this fulfills Crystal Lil's vision of the ultimate gift she could give her children (i.e. "the ability to make a living simply by being themselves"), it also replicates the anti-sex work sentiments encoded in the cultural discussion of women on stage in the nineteenth century (Dunn 7).

Miranda's "to-be-looked-at-ness" is problematic for Oly because it makes her "little" and makes the act "little." It loses, in a sense, its spectacular power, which for Oly is to be what she would call "high-powered" performance on par with Elly and Iphy (17). Oly, the watcher, fails to recognize the possibility of looking at Miranda as anything but a sexual object, but roots this, too, in biology. She reads Miranda as less skillful and less empowered than her own siblings because of the audience's response to her bodily display onstage, in which their own bodies "lifted up, clean and simple to her in the clear, unconscious awareness of each of their cells' sensing that she would grunt out strong young" (17). The unconscious "sensing" of sexual response happens again in the deep structure of the cells, echoing Oly's description of Miranda's proclivities for the freakish. In both cases, the biological body determines destiny: it is Miranda's destiny to use her body to make a living simply by being herself, and it is the audience's destiny to be attracted to her. In this construction, the material body holds the most agency, solidifying its position as a critical tool to rework the effects of discourse.

However, for Miranda, the exposure of her naked body—tail and all—is a transformative experience. She explains to her mother during one of their portrait sessions that she grew up ashamed and embarrassed about her tail, until the day she discovered club stripping. "Then I heard about the Glass House, where they weren't interested if you were just pretty and could dance but wanted something spectacular," she explains to her mother. "It was a joke to audition. Or an experiment. A different approach to my tail. But since I've been working there I don't feel the same way about my tail. Now I think, in a way, it's kind of marvelous" (33). By calling her tail "marvelous," Miranda invokes the sense of wonder, much as Jane Merritt's dead body does in *Signs of Life*. However, Miranda's sense of the marvelous is entirely her own. This appellation is something she understands about her own body, rather than a posthumous comment from the

patriarchal gaze. By using her freakish, sexual, and feminine body to perform, Miranda not only claims her own agency, but points out how doing so reverses the very heterosexist paradigms her mother assumes in her reading of the strip show. The Glass House explicitly looks for performances beyond being “just pretty” with a modicum of dance talent, but instead seeks something “spectacular.” Dunn’s lush descriptions of the acts that happen on the Glass House’s stage illustrate that the spectacularity is both the unique embodiment of each dancer, as well as the structure and skill of the performances themselves. By performing their monstrous femininity in the strip club, the dancers at the Glass House subvert the assumed heterosexual gaze of the striptease and transform it into a tool that recognizes the laboring capacity of their own bodies. They become both the artist and the nude, transforming the narratives about their bodies on their own terms.

However, much like the freak show itself, the conventions of the genre, as Liepe-Levinson so thoroughly articulates, can trouble this critical potential by retreating into theatrical frameworks that present men as voiced and women as voiceless, as is the case with the Glass House’s MC:

The bald man was chanting into the microphone. “Yes, it’s real, folks, give it a tug there, Denise. We’d let you come up on stage and pull the little lady’s hair for yourselves, boys, just to verify it’s genuine, but state law forbids, and you’ve got to admit, a few souvenir hunters could put poor Denise out of business.” She swayed her hips and the long hair flicked from side to side. “How do you find her in there? I want to know!” (17).

Liepe-Levinson notes that the strip club MC “plays the part of a challenger who, like the barkers of amusement parks, dares and encourages the participants, goading them into action by pointing out the extraordinary qualities of the entertainment” (158). She further suggests that the

MC/barker is one of the ways in which female sexuality within this performance context is both “socially manipulated and controlled” as well as a “signifier of transgression,” as part of the talker’s work in these performance contexts is to continually remind the audience “that the social and economic hierarchies have been restructured in the world of this play.” The talker at the Glass House indeed highlights the obviously extraordinary qualities of entertainers like Denise, daring them to verify the realness of Denise’s long pubic hair, but also reminding them that they fundamentally cannot complete the verification process because “state law forbids” (Dunn 17). Though Liepe-Levinson’s comparison between carnival barkers and strip club MCs is supported by *Geek Love*’s emphasis on the freakish femininity of the Glass House strippers, the MC in this case does not build his spiel around reminders of social and economic restructuring. By invoking the state’s laws, the patrons are instead told to behave, and are reminded that any interference with Denise’s material body would ultimately rob her of her economic viability. To joke that “a few souvenir hunters could put poor Denise out of business” asserts the dancer’s economic autonomy within the environment of the Glass House, and this does ostensibly reverse the power of the scopophilic gaze through economic exchange. However, the joke itself undercuts this by invoking the threat or loss of Denise’s power, and reinforcing her status as “poor.” The MC’s intervention in Denise’s performance reduces her to a pitiable object – yet another woman talked over by a man.

In the amateur night contest run by the Glass House, the theatrical structures of the strip club itself further complicate the power of the nude body onstage. The “scramble of flesh” that takes the stage that night includes a “fat woman” whose “breasts had fallen, thick and long, mixing with the rolls of fat that hung puffily over her belly,” a “fat man in a glitter jockstrap,” two middle-aged men in “matching red plastic jeans with broad leather belts strapping their

adjacent legs together” as though they were faux Siamese twins in “expert Oriental makeup,” and a “startled young girl” who “must have thought she was actually auditioning for a job” (18-19). As Oly watches the grotesque display, she becomes pulled in to the melee of jiggling bodies, and is forcibly stripped down to participate in the contest against her will. The structure of the amateur contest deliberately disrupts the genre conventions of strip shows that grant clothed, male audience members power over naked, female dancers onstage by breaking the fourth wall. Here, audience members become performers for a few moments, and are compensated for their participation with “five-dollar bills” (20). The remaining audience members respond positively to the display, but their “fierce” laughter denotes that the performances are read as a kind of cruel comedy.

Despite the violence of her forced participation, and the laughter of the crowd, dancing naked onstage changes Oly’s perspective on the power of nude performance, if only for a moment:

I lift my thin arms and waggle my huge hands and bob to the light, and my knees begin to shift in what my body calls dance, waving my hump at the crowd, the light warming my scalp and burning into my unprotected eyes. My big shoes thump at the ends of my little legs and I am proud with my arrow tits flapping toward my knees, and the fat lady standing on my coat is staring, with spittle across her cheek, and the fat man with his electric G-string pumping at his invisible crotch and laughing, and the shouts coming up, ‘Christ! It’s real!’ The twisting of my hump feels good against the warm air and the sweat of my bald head runs down into my bald eyes and strings with brightness and the spirit of the waggling hump moves over the stage and catches red pants, hairy bellies, and all, while I stamp on my buttonless blouse, slide on the tangled elastic harness, and open my

near-blind eyes wide so they can see that there is true pink there – the raw albino eye in the lashless sockets – and it is good. How proud I am, dancing in the air full of eyes rubbing at me uncovered, unable to look away because of what I am. Those poor hoptoads behind me are silent. I’ve conquered them. They thought to use and shame me but I win out by nature, because a true freak cannot be made. A true freak must be born.”

(20)

Olympia’s performance at the Glass House can hardly be called skillful as she stamps and slides around the stage on her discarded clothing. But in displaying her naked body before a crowd, Oly arrests the gaze of the audience, who are now “unable to look away” from her material difference. In this moment, she reverses her earlier position on the spectacular power of the naked female body. In *Exile & Pride*, Eli Clare links the history of public stripping – a medical practice in which doctors examined groups of disabled children in public, forcibly removing their clothes to do so – to the exhibition of disabled bodies in the freak show, arguing that both acts “take control away from disabled people” and allow a large group of nondisabled people to “gawk unabashedly for free” (103-104). Olympia understands her “public stripping” as an act through which she has “conquered” the “poor hoptoads” onstage behind her and the “air full of eyes” who intended to “shame” her by exposing her difference. She reverses the potentially damaging act of being forcibly stripped, and transforms it into a moment of ownership that is enabled by her material body itself. When she argues that she “win[s] out by nature, because a true freak cannot be made,” Oly suggests that social constructions are inherently tied to materiality, as a “true freak must be born.”

Oly’s declaration in this moment reiterates the Althusserian construction that “individuals are always-already subjects,” as even before birth, children are constructed as subjects “in and by

the specific familial ideological configuration in which it is ‘expected’ once it has been conceived” (Althusser 119). She “win[s] out by nature” not because of any innate “naturalness” of her material body, but because of the ideological expectations of being born a Binewski. In Al and Lil’s desire to interpolate their children as part of the Binewski family and the Binewski Carnival Fabulon (for family and business are one in the same for Al and Lil), their ideological leanings quite literally shape the material conditions of their children’s bodies through experimentation with “illicit and prescription drugs, insecticides, and eventually radioisotopes” during Lil’s pregnancies (Dunn 7). Though each of the Binewski children is indeed always-already a freak, the stylized performances they present within the commercial realm of the carnival crystalize that freakishness, and make it legible through performativity.

For Oly, being able to inhabit her body and display it without hiding it or covering it up becomes a moment of reconciliation with her embodiment. Regarding her albinism and hunchback, she remarks, “It was a disappointment when I emerged with such commonplace deformities” and that the later appearance of her dwarfism “increased” her value to her family (Dunn 8). If the family acts as a gateway to public life, then Al and Lil’s response to their daughter’s embodiment is citational in the sense that their ideological values establish and reiterate certain “laws” of being for the Binewski family. Citationality is aligned with performativity in Butler’s work, both of which demonstrate that agency conferred by power “in no way presupposes a choosing subject” (Butler 16). This places abjected and delegitimized subjects at the “bounds of bodily life,” and therefore Olympia becomes doubly abjected. Always-already freaks, the Binewski children live out the material effects of their family’s own normative practices (norms based on spectacularized difference from others), but Olympia is not freakish enough for her family business because her material embodiment does not hold enough

difference to be valuable. As Butler notes, “Naming is at once the setting of a boundary, and also the repeated inculcation of a norm” (8). The value placed on material bodies as a marker of one’s Binewski-ness both sets the boundaries between freaks and norms, but also establishes its own freakish normativity that abjects Oly based on her material difference.<sup>11</sup> In her amateur night performance at the Glass House, Oly’s body becomes a tool through which she begins to destabilize the constructions of freakishness and femininity that have historically abjected and delegitimated her existence. Miranda, too, accesses this power in her striptease performances when she learns to think of her tail as “marvelous,” finally growing into “her amazing body” and revising the disappointment her own mother experiences upon seeing that she possessed “only that ridiculous tail” (312).

By owning these moments of bodily display as watershed statements of femininity (and disabled femininity at that), the women of *Geek Love* rework the constraints of normativity by making their private bodies public. The performance of nudity within the context of these striptease freak shows makes material embodiment into a performative tool that both points to and transgresses the effects of discourse. Janet Davis notes that in the nineteenth century, press agents often utilized gender performativity to “to poke fun at contemporary gender norms” by placing “physically diverse women freaks into the rubric of traditional womanhood by using the visual trappings of normality: gowns, husbands, parlors, and love of home.” Davis suggests that this rhetorical move both “normalized physical abnormality” as well as “helped reify a single standard of ideal womanhood, because showmen marketed each of the women as quintessentially a ‘real woman’ at heart” (123). Likewise, the strip show serves as a marker of

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<sup>11</sup> Because of this, the normal-seeming, cherubic Chick is nearly abandoned by his parents until his telepathic powers begin to surface. Though Chick’s normative embodiment may make him seem like the least valuable Binewski, his telepathic powers and ability to “pass” make him less abject than Oly.

ideal female embodiment within a commercially-driven environment of heterosexual fantasy. But by placing diverse material bodies within this context, Miranda, Oly, and the other “specialties” at the Glass House rework the constraints of ideal femininity as they are both “born” and “made” freaks. In *The Happy Stripper*, Jacki Wilson suggests that contemporary neo-burlesque stripteasers operate at the level of “self-made ‘freaks,’” presumably for manipulating the feminist rhetoric of choice to turn themselves into objects for consumption (150). Wilson implies that there is power in harnessing the freakish for these women, but also seems to suggest that this might not really be an empowered choice, echoing Dolan and Mulvey’s work on the male gaze. However, as Liepe-Levinson contends, “It is virtually impossible for any participant, male or female, to buy control over all the gazes that can occur in a theatrical encounter” (164). What matters in these contexts is not who the spectators are, but the fact that there are spectators at all.

Staging the exposed female body within public, theatrical contexts effectively transforms the boundaries of the public and the private. These acts transgress the discursive limits of the private and restrained body, thereby changing women’s relationship to public space as one of defiant ownership. In this sense, these female freaks are self-made, as they rework and open up the boundaries once crystallized through their material bodies. Through performative acts of public nudity, they remake themselves as public figures, leveraging their freakish embodiment in acts of creative production.

**CHAPTER THREE:****VISUALIZING DISABILITY: MAT FRASER & THE STAGING OF RADICAL  
DIFFERENCE**

“Unexpected desire drives a wedge into the narrowness of taste. The chaos of desire widens your erotic vision, and changes your very template of beauty. It is crucial to remain conscious of this reciprocal shift.”

– Riva Leher

In June 2013, Mat “Sealboy” Fraser stands onstage at Seattle’s Triple Door nightclub in a red G-string and a matching satin vest. With a microphone clutched in his right hand, he croons Andy Williams’ “Born Free” while he wanders through the crowd, accentuating the appearance of the song’s title with a spirited pelvic thrust toward an audience member. During instrumental breaks, Fraser go-go dances in the audience and encourages patrons to tip appropriately. Several other members of the all-male striptease revue *Kings* join him in this endeavor. When Fraser stops by my table, I excitedly tuck a dollar bill into his g-string as he continues to croon, “Born free, and life is worth living / but only worth living / ‘cause you’re born free.”

In 1941 at the World Circus Sideshow in Coney Island, Stanislas Berent, who performed under the name Seal-O the Sealboy, creates a different kind of spectacle simply by performing everyday tasks. Though he has no arms, his hands erupting from his shoulders rather than his

wrists, Seal-O demonstrates his skill at sawing wood and at shaving with a straight razor. He doesn't sing, but he does exit the stage after his act to sell and sign pitch cards for his fans. No one stuffs a dollar bill into his underwear, but the audience does giddily fork over their money for a souvenir and a signature.

Though their performance careers are separated by more than 50 years, Fraser and Berent have one critical commonality: they share the same disability. Both men have phocomelia, a congenital disorder in which the limbs cease full development in utero. The disorder's physical characteristics mark the afflicted with shortened or missing arms or legs, with hands jutting from elbows or shoulders rather than wrists, or feet protruding from hip joints or knee joints rather than ankles. Though it can sometimes significantly limit mobility, persons with phocomelia more often than not have hyper mobile joints that accommodate different ranges of motion than those of average knees or ankles. But although the medical realities of the common embodiment shared by Berent and Fraser are notable and pertinent to this chapter, the fact that both men also make their living through their unique embodiments is perhaps even more so. However similar Berent and Fraser may appear to be, they are not equals. Berent's stage appearances were limited to sideshows, freak shows, and fairgrounds, while Fraser has appeared on legitimate stages in theatres worldwide, and on TV screens both in his native UK and, recently, on Ryan Murphy's *American Horror Story: Freak Show*.

What unites Berent and Fraser, other than their shared embodiment, is that both men willingly perform as freaks. For Berent, working as Seal the Sealboy in freak shows was a viable employment opportunity, and Fraser, too, has performed under the big top at the Coney Island Circus Sideshow in addition to his (relatively) mainstream acting career. Additionally, both Berent and Fraser are recognized as de facto disability rights activists. Although American

sideshows had steadily declined in popularity by the 1950s, Sealo continued to perform well into the 1970s, at least until he moved to Florida, the preferred retirement site for sideshow attractions. Sealo and many others wished that they could perform in Florida, but were forbidden to do so under a 1921 law. Sealo, along with Pete Terhurne, a dwarf, and sideshow proprietor Ward Hall sued the state of Florida on grounds of discrimination in 1972 – and won. The court ruled: “One who is handicapped or in an unfortunate position because of physical handicaps or deformities, in no wise of his own choosing, must be allowed a reasonable chance within his capacities to earn a livelihood” (Hartzman, 212-213). While Fraser hasn’t been involved in any noteworthy legal cases regarding disability rights, his work in modern day sideshows (and on other stages) very much takes up the political charge of the freak performer set in motion by Berent. In an artist statement published in the 2013 *Journal of Visual Art Practice* entitled “Crippling It Up,” Fraser writes:

“In Coney Island’s ‘Sideshows by the Seashore’, the last and only permanent sideshow in the United States, I have explored and created my work, all the while being a working natural born freak in the shows, whilst simultaneously developing an understanding and practice that comments on contemporary culture from the stance of a re-imagining of the Freak as a cultural commodity, as a disabled and disabling identity.” (247)

Within the field of disability studies, the “freak” is highly controversial. Some scholars, many of whom personally identify as persons with disabilities, argue that the freak show itself was complicit in constructing persons with disabilities as “less than” their able-bodied counterparts. Eli Clare writes about his discomfort with the term in *Exile & Pride*, noting that the social construction of freaks “always relied upon the perceived gap between a rube’s normality and a freak’s abnormality” (76). By putting the person with a disability in the position to be

looked as “Other,” the freak show simply replicates the power dynamics of an already ableist world which defines normality “exclusively in terms of whiteness and able-bodiedness” (Clare 76). However, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s *Extraordinary Bodies* suggests that the freak show was less damaging to persons with disabilities than it may seem. Garland-Thomson argues that staring is distinct from the gaze “which has been extensively defined as an oppressive act of disciplinary looking that subordinates its victim,” reframing the former in terms of “dynamic struggle” between starrer and staree that involves engagement and response from both parties (9, 3). Her construction suggests that the dynamics of staring can be a confrontation that renegotiates the traditional power structure established between spectators and spectacle. Garland-Thomson’s distinction between staring and gazing offers historically “othered” subjects such as those who once performed in the freak show the benefit of agency within their own representation. Her understanding of the freak show as a place that invites stares suggests that by broadening the public’s exposure to anomalous bodies, the cultural work of the freak show also broadens public understanding, acceptance, and engagement with disability.

Eli Clare is much more reserved in his analysis of the power of the freak show, and, particularly, the type of looking it invites from spectators. Clare posits that the dynamics of the freak show enabled certain freaks, those who had some “control over their own display,” to “flaunt” their disabilities in ways that were “curious, odd, surprising, horrifying, wondrous,” and that the power to flaunt was structured into the presentational structures of the freak show by a culture in which “voyeurism was morally acceptable” (83). His uneasiness with the term “freak” comes from this voyeurism, which Clare critiques as complicit in the pathologization of disability in the post-freak show era. “The end of the freak show didn’t mean the end of our

display or the end of voyeurism. We simply traded one kind of freakdom for another,” Clare argues (87).

Clare’s timeline seems to cast the pathologization of disability as a result of the freak show, suggesting an easy transition from the curious spectatorial gaze of the audience to the scientific gaze of medicine. This is too neat a divide, given that the scientific display of disabled bodies long predated the freak show, and was also concurrent with it (as the story of Joseph Carey Merrick attests). But perhaps Clare’s sense of unease in the term “freak” lies there – in the troubling politics of staring, looking, and gazing that frame the presentation of “freaks.” Both Clare and Garland-Thomson are concerned with what the act of looking means in terms of making disability “visible.” Certainly, visibility matters, and a significant portion of the scholarship on freak shows, including Garland-Thomson, suggest that the heightened visibility of freak performers did much to increase the visibility of persons with disabilities overall. But as Robert McRuer notes in his analysis of Garland-Thomson’s work on photography, “visual rhetorics of disability do not *necessarily* improve over time, nor do they posit (or instruct, construct, or assure) a disabled viewer” (177). Given that blindness in various forms accounts for 2.3% of all reported disabilities in the United States as of 2014, the emphasis on visual modes of understanding disability do seem to leave out a significant portion of the disabled population.<sup>12</sup> Looking, gazing, and staring are certainly worthy of discussion, considering the sight-based nature of the freak show. But if we are to build new frameworks for understanding disability, why does disability theory at large continue to be concerned with vision as its primary

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<sup>12</sup> According to Cornell University’s Disability Statistics website, 12.6% of the overall U.S. population reported a disability of any kind, including visual disabilities, hearing loss, cognitive disabilities, independent living disabilities, self-care disabilities, and ambulatory disabilities. Cornell’s statistics are derived from the American Community Survey, which is administered to a sample of 3,061,306 non-institutionalized American adults. It is unknown how many persons with disabilities may be incarcerated or under other types of institutional care.

epistemological mode? How might a focus on “visualization” lend new insight (pun intended) to the ways we “see” disability? To visualize something is to “form a mental vision, image, or picture of (something not visible or present to the sight, or of an abstraction); to make visible to the mind or imagination,” according to the OED. I want to reframe the discussion of how disability is understood through visual encounters in terms of how these encounters might help us to better “visualize” disability. That is, although this chapter retains a focus on visual schemas, I read those as tools through which disability can be imagined and embodied in terms of how disabled artists visualize themselves, and how these self-visualizations can instruct or construct alternative modes of “seeing” disability.

These questions about how disability can be visualized are particularly germane to the work of performance artist, actor, and disability activist Mat Fraser – and by extension to the work of Stanley Berent. Fraser, 54, was born with phocomelia, a by-product of the drug Thalidomide, popularly prescribed to cure morning sickness during the 1950s and 1960s. Fraser’s history as a performer with a disability is long and storied. In the 80s, he was a punk rock drummer. In the 90s, a rapper and martial artist. In the late 90s, he began working at the Coney Island Circus Sideshow and started producing his own one-man plays, musicals, and other spectacles that incorporated the representational politics of the sideshow into his work. Not long after, Fraser began to perform in cabarets, both as an emcee and as a burlesque artist. But regardless of the medium of expression, Fraser’s artistic repertoire constructs his disabled body as essential to himself. That is, Fraser’s work is both critically about his disability and a result of it.

While scholars such as David Gerber consider the sideshow as a black mark in the representational history of persons with disabilities, Fraser’s work actively engages in the

aesthetic qualities and genre conventions of the sideshow in order to transform oppressive, spectatorial, and medicalized gazes at his disabled body into a dynamic struggle that challenges and provokes audience members to confront compulsory able-bodiedness. Building on critical disability studies work by Garland-Thomson, Tobin Siebers, Petra Kupperts, and Eli Clare, this chapter puts the spotlight on Fraser's 1996 one-man play, *Sealboy-Freak*, and his 2012 burlesque act, "The Arms," to argue that by "flaunting" his disability through the incorporation and negotiation of sideshow tropes in his works critique the ideology of ability that governs both writing and performance, and in doing so visualizes disability as radical embodiment.

In *Disability Theory*, Tobin Siebers argues that the presence of disability as "complex embodiment" critiques the ideology of ability (30). Understanding disability as complex embodiment grants that disability is a corporeal experience that includes pain, trauma, and physical limitation (in addition, of course, to pleasure and vitality), while bearing down on the construction of disability as a social reality informed and shaped by the ideology of ability. The ideology of ability is not only a preference for able-bodiedness, but the product network of social relations that "define the baseline by which humanness is determined, setting the measure of body and mind that gives or denies human status to individual persons" (9). In this context, claiming a disability identity affords a "critical framework" through which to disturb and critique the ideology of ability itself (9). What "complex embodiment" offers as a critical term is an understanding of disability that recognizes the physical body as giving "concrete form to the theory of social construction" (30). Complex embodiment does not posit representation as a "pale shadow of the world or the world as a shadow world of representation," but as a dynamic engagement in which "both sides push back in the construction of reality" (30). Complex embodiment demands that we recognize disability as methodology that understands the co-

constructive properties of both representational strategies and embodied experience, and which denies easy categorization along the able-bodied/disabled binary.

Visual engagement is key in recognizing complex embodiment. In her 2009 monograph, *Staring: How We Look*, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson investigates the human stare and its complex role in human interaction, especially as it pertains to persons with disabilities. While it is generally considered socially uncouth to stare at another person, Garland-Thomson offers that the “furtive, guilty pleasure” of the stare can be “a mutually vivifying visual dance in which starers and starees engage one another” (5). She is careful to note that the stare is distinct from the gaze because of this potential for mutual engagement. The gaze is one-sided, and non-dynamic. It is a form of “disciplinary looking” that subordinates (9). Staring, in Garland-Thomson’s analysis, is a critical act that can trouble and unmake the ideology of ability. “When people with stareable bodies . . . enter into the public eye, when they no longer hide themselves or allow themselves to be hidden, the visual landscape enlarges” (9). She continues, because of the prevalence of the medical model of disability, able-bodied persons view disability as “an uncommon visitation that mostly happens to someone else” (19). This attitude toward disability has contributed to the public invisibility of disabled bodies. Not only are public spaces not designed for easy access by persons with disabilities, but ill, injured, diseased and disabled bodies are routinely hidden from public view. “Avowing disability as tragic or shameful,” Garland-Thomson writes, “we have hidden away disabled people in asylums, segregated schools, hospitals, and nursing homes. When we ourselves develop disabilities, we often hide them as well, sometimes through semantic slights-of-hand, sometimes through normalizing medical procedures that erase disability, and sometimes through closeting our conditions. This hiding of

disability has made it seem unusual or foreign rather than fundamental to our human embodiedness” (19-20).

Garland-Thomson traces the invisibility of disabled bodies alongside shifting cultural preferences for modes of vision. The dominant visual mode of the nineteenth century, for example, was observation, which “replaced witnessing with the rise of rationalism and scientific inquiry” (27). The observational mode, as Rachel Adams also notes in her work on nineteenth century anthropology in *Sideshow U.S.A.*, enabled science to use “vision and visual images to categorize and rank people. Evidence fathered from observing the exterior of bodies was thought to reveal people’s character and index their value as humans” (Garland-Thomson, 28). What Garland-Thomson links to the medical gaze that “probes the patient’s body and pronounces its fate” also contributes to the foundation of race science, eugenics, and other late nineteenth century epistemologies for which biopower is key (29). Under the visual code of “observation,” bodies that differ from the normate masses (i.e. white, able-bodied, heterosexual, male) are subject to classification, study, and regulation. The observational medical gaze takes note of difference, but only to support its own superior position.

This visual schema shifted with the dawn of late capitalism, in which “consumer vision” becomes the predominant form of looking:

If as Lizabeth Cohen (2003) suggests, one central task of citizenship in our era is consuming, looking is at the heart of this demanding and exhilarating job. The cultural call to be consumers primarily requires looking at commodities, not people. Consumer vision often entails not the intense, focused scrutiny of staring but rather the casual visual cruising of window-shopping or Web surfing . . . The consumer is a contemporary

version of the flaneur, roaming the mall as a destination, not so much to actually buy but rather to take in the spectacle and to look for possible action. (29)

Where the goal of observation is scientific categorization, consumer vision constantly searches for novelty. It seeks out objects with which to interact, and staring at a novel object is one method by which consumer vision engages with the world around it “amid the bloated stasis of mass visual culture. The novel item attracts, but the novel person seizes our eye more intimately” (30). Cohen’s consumer vision is striking in its relationship to Fraser’s own framing of freaks “as a cultural commodity, as a disabled and disabling identity” (Fraser 247). The disabled subject of the consumer gaze in the context of the freak show is simultaneously a person and a commodity, redirecting the eye’s quest for novelty onto an ideal visual subject.

The simple act of a disabled body existing in a public space invites stares because of its relative novelty, and this novelty is arousing. Novelty arrests ordinary vision, forcing an able-bodied viewer to adjust her usual method of looking to accommodate an unusual form. Garland-Thomson suggests that the stare results from a failure of ordinary vision to fully process what lies in the visual landscape. Her metaphoric use of failure rhetorically links the stare of the able-bodied viewer to the perceived “failure” of the disabled body it is staring at. The act of staring, then, changes able-bodied vision into a kind of disabled perception. “The eyes hang on, working to recognize what seems illegible, order what seems unruly, know what seems strange,” Garland-Thomson writes (3). In the process of making sense of an illegible sight, vision itself becomes rearranged in ways that accommodate new visual experiences.

Garland-Thomson is careful to note that staring is not reactive, but interactive, thus creating the “dynamic struggle” between starrer and staree:

Staring bespeaks involvement, and being stared at demands a response. A staring encounter is a dynamic struggle – starers inquire, starees lock eyes or flee, and starers advance or retreat; one moves forward and the other moves back. A staring interchange can tickle or alienate, persist or evolve. Staring’s brief bond can also be intimate, generating a sense of obligation between persons, what Joshua Meile calls ‘an unavoidable consequence of empathy’ . . . Staring, then, shows us something about how we look at each other and how we look to each other.” (3-4)

Her theory of staring admits the possibility for a stare to deny engagement by creating either alienation or uncomfortable intimacy between parties, and also suggests that these feelings of discomfort that arise from a staring encounter are critical to disrupting the “disciplined will” of an authoritarian gaze by “seducing” us into “an attention crisis” (21). In this manner, visual interaction between parties in a staring encounter “stirs us up, makes us receptive” to new feelings, ideas, and aesthetic possibilities (39). When public freak shows all but disappeared from the American cultural landscape, the sight of an anomalous or disabled body within a public space became a disruptive sight, rather than a structured staring encounter on the stage. However, stories from the stage now coded real life staring encounters. “The sight of living people with unusual bodies invites us to remap fantastic stories of giants, dwarfs, and monsters onto those people . . . because they are unfamiliar as flesh and too familiar as narrative,” she writes. But in mapping cultural narratives of difference inherited from freak shows and other forms of display onto these bodies, the starees begin to lose particularity in the eyes of the starrer. No longer individuals with anomalous bodies, they become seen as freaks or cripples instead, casting “those who are too large, too small, or too irregular outside of the circle of common humanity,” Garland-Thomson writes (167).

Garland-Thomson reads this narrativizing impulse alongside Susan Sontag's concept of the ethical stare. In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Sontag delineates good stares from bad ones. A bad stare, she suggests, is one in which the starrer takes pleasure in the sight of the misery or misfortune of the staree. In these cases, there is no identification between the starrer and the staree, and so the starrer is assured of their own safety and wholeness in the act of staring. It is a passive response, unlike a good or ethical stare, in which the starrer is moved to political engagement through the staring act. The stareable sight may be the same, but the response of the starrer makes all the difference. However, Sontag's analysis of ethical and unethical staring is based in staring at static photographs for which that can be no mutual engagement. Garland-Thomson puts Sontag's work on photographs into conversation with Elaine Scarry's *On Beauty and Being Just*, which asserts that the objects of stares also have active roles in staring encounters. By moving its perceivers to steward everyone's "opportunity for access to beauty," Scarry argues that looking at beautiful things generates social justice. Garland-Thomson writes, "This is exactly the 'action' Sontag expects from good staring at bad pictures. One might say that such staring works to preserve the distinctiveness, the novelty, that animates the staring encounter" (187).

In her analysis of Scarry and Sontag's work on looking at beauty and staring at ugliness, Garland-Thomson builds a theory of "visual activism" for persons with disabilities. Because disabled bodies invite stares, simply being in the public eye reshapes the field of vision to accommodate bodily anomalies. Being visibly disabled in public harnesses the human desire for novelty in order to attract stares, allowing persons with disabilities to "use the way they look, the way we look at them, and what they say about it to ask the public to think differently about people like them." This final step, Garland-Thomson notes, depends on the starrer's

receptiveness. If the starers respond to the hypervisibility of the starees, the starers become primed to act in new ways: “to vote differently, to spend money differently, to build the world differently, to treat people differently, and to look at people differently” (193).

Garland-Thomson’s analysis moves toward a practical methodology for visualizing disability on the basis of increasing public visibility. Because many of these staring encounters happen in real life, they are dynamic experiences that move and respond to the participants throughout the duration of the stare. If a staring encounter is not interrupted or otherwise terminated, it can become a transformative interaction through “deft management” of what Garland-Thomson dubs “be-holding, of holding the being of another particular individual in the eye of the beholder” (194). By beholding another human being, the two parties create a sense of beholdenness to one another as a response to “the productive discomfort” of mutual presence. Beholdenness acts as a “radical besiegement of both starrer and staree” in such a way that can generate “mutual new knowledge and potential social justice” (194). By working through the dynamic engagement of a staring encounter, both parties develop a close, interpersonal relationship that can carry the engagement forward.

In considering beholdenness, the staring encounter must also consider how starees manage and, perhaps, stage these encounters. Garland-Thomson suggest that starees “invite” stares simply by virtue of their difference, but this standing invitation does not necessarily imply active consent by the staree. The invitation to the stare may, in some cases, be unwanted. It should also be noted that Garland-Thomson’s formulation implies an able-bodied starrer adjusting his or her vision to incorporate the novelty of the disabled staree, and not the other way around. These staring encounters are entirely dependent on contexts in which the power to look is given to the person in the normate position, while the non-normate person is to be looked at. The

potential for “productive discomfort” depends on seizing hold of the gulf of difference between parties, and assumes that both parties will then choose to grapple with the encounter, which might not always be the case. The staring encounter, then, is a risky one, especially for the non-normate staree. But by framing staring as a catalyst for visual activism, Garland-Thomson suggests that persons with disabilities can transform these encounters from visual confirmation of difference into a methodology for visualizing disability in the minds (and visual fields) of their able-bodied viewers.

Stirring up these visual encounters, however, may involve discomfort for those with stareable bodies, especially when the stare “outs” difference that may have been concealed by prosthesis or other theoretical “closeting” techniques for persons with disabilities – techniques which strive to reduce the visible and visual experience of disability. In queer theory (and in queer experience), the closet “controls the flow of information beyond individual desire for disclosure or secrecy” and because it is also able to “convert either disclosure or secrecy into the opposite” (Siebers 99). In *Disability Theory*, Tobin Siebers intervenes in Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick’s argument regarding visible stigma and passing engendered by the formulation of the closet itself. In “The Epistemology of the Closet,” Sedgwick argues that homophobia does not rely on visible stigma as does discrimination based on race, gender, age, size and disability, critically comparing the queer closet to the biblical story of Queen Esther and the disclosure of her Jewish identity to her gentile husband. Sedgwick notes some key differences between in the act of Esther’s “coming out” and a queer coming out, chiefly: the party to whom she discloses her identity does not doubt her Jewishness once it is revealed; her coming out is not undercut by someone else’s control of this knowledge; coming out as a Jewish woman does not damage her reputation; her relationship with her husband is not changed because of this revelation; there is

no suggestion that the person to whom she is disclosing her Jewish identity might also be a “Jew in disguise”; her disclosure confirms the expected behavior of gender as a virtuous woman (Sedgwick 53-54). The Esther example effectively demonstrates how the closet functions differently for queer subjects than for other identities that are unmarked by visual stigma. Being in or out of the closet, Sedgwick argues, is the “fundamental feature of social life” for queer subjects in that it organizes information about one’s private life as a public concern, especially given the history of legal consequences to those who were outed as homosexual.

Siebers acknowledges the epistemology of the closet necessarily “complicates the usual understanding of passing because it disrupts the structural binary that presents passing as an action taking place between knowing and unknowing subjects.” He notes that passing by being in the closet can be a voluntary action to ensure social advantage (and therefore safety), while at other times marginalized people are “locked in” the closet, alluding to the long history of institutionalization created “to keep secret the existence of disabled family members” (97-98). Noting that not all disabilities are visible (such as deafness, chronic illness, autism, or dyslexia), Siebers suggests that disability offers “forms of legibility and illegibility that alter the logic of the closet” (100). He distinguishes passing, which preserves social hierarchies in the process by reinforcing the dominant social position “as simultaneously normative and desirable,” from masquerade: masquerade serves as a form of passing that layers on physical or performative signifiers of one’s marginalized identity, that’s indebted to Joan Riviere’s analysis of “womanliness” as masquerade (101). While some disabled people may try to pass as non-disabled (perhaps through the use of flesh-tone prosthetics combined with strategic clothing choices), others may “out” themselves as disabled (perhaps through the rejection of prosthetics altogether, or by opting for prosthetics that deliberately do not blend in with the rest of the body).

Assuming the features of “an identity marked as stigmatized, marginal, or inferior” functions as a methodology for managing social stigma by outing oneself as a person with a disability, but this strategic performance conversely permits the disability masquerade “to benefit the able-bodied public and to reinforce the ideology of ability” (111).

As a representational strategy, disability masquerade compels persons with disabilities to come out as disabled “so that nondisabled people will not be confused, while guaranteeing at the same time that [disabled people] will be rendered invisible” because complex embodiment tends to be repressed under the ideology of ability (102). The naming of disability within an able-bodied world serves the ideology of ability by privileging the comfort of the able-bodied over the needs of the person with a disability. Coming out of the disability closet, as is true of the queer closet, acknowledges a difference, either visible or invisible, for the benefit of the able-bodied, who can then dismiss or continue to not acknowledge the presence of the disability once it has been named, making the disabled “even more invisible and vulnerable as a result” (103). This dual move of naming and invisibilizing disability highlights a paradox of neoliberalism: by acknowledging difference, but subsuming it under the ideology of ability, disability points out that the politics of inclusion marginalizes non able-bodied subjects. “The more visible the disability, the greater the chance that the disabled person will be repressed from public view and forgotten. The masquerade,” Siebers writes, “shows that disability exists at the same time that it, as masquerade, does not exist” (103).

While masquerade relies on visible symbols of disability in order to allow a person to “pass” as disabled, invisible disabilities trouble this logic, lacking the recognizable and visible signals of disability such as the white cane, the wheelchair, or the crutch. Mel Y. Chen contemplates masquerade’s reliance on prosthetics to render environmental illnesses (and other

invisible disabilities) publicly legible in *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering and Queer Affect*. Chen, who often wears a chemical respirator when out in public in order to stave off the effects of environmental toxins on their compromised immune system, writes:

Both Ellen Samuels and Robert McRuer have discussed the ways in which “coming out” as disabled provocatively overlaps with, and also differs from, “coming out” as queer. How does a mask help interrupt the notion of “passing”? How does it render as “damaged” (or, at least, vulnerable) a body that might otherwise seem healthy? Not wearing a chemical mask counts as a guise of passing, of the appearance of non-disability: I look well when I am maskless in public, at least until I crumple.

The use of the literal mask as an essential prosthesis for environmentally ill subjects is notable in light of Tobin Siebers’s deployment of “masquerade” as an exaggeration of disability symbols to manage or intervene in social schemas about ability and disability. This dialogic friction between actual mask as facial appurtenance – the mask’s literal locus on the face – and mask or masquerade as a racial, non-disabled, or sexuality metaphor points to the central significance of face as intersubjective locus, and it exemplifies the expropriability of a facial notion of embattlement to the rest of the (human) body or to social spheres of interaction; but it also points to the complexities that emerge when the actual facial signification of disability rubs up against the facial mask metaphor. Arguably, a chemical mask can serve as its own masquerade, but it also slips and slides into orthographical significations. Its reading as exaggeration, in particular, competes with its reading as racializing and masculinizing toxic threat, where the skin of the mask ambivalently locates the threat on either side of it. (200-201)

Chen's chemical respirator performs multiple significations, in which the mask as masquerade of Chen's disability, which enables passers-by to understand Chen as "ill" in some way, "rubs up against" the idea that observers may read Chen as a toxic threat. As a prosthesis or an adaptive device, the chemical respirator neutralizes environmental toxins, enabling Chen to function in the metropolitan environment without significant damage of their immune system. It also "outs" Chen as disabled, while simultaneously outing them as a "queer" subject. The respirator prevents Chen from passing as able-bodied, which they would arguably do without the respirator as masquerade, as well as from engaging in other forms of passing. The hypervisibility of the chemical respirator may well prevent Chen from succumbing to masquerade's sublimating functions. Because the chemical mask obscures so much of Chen's face as to render them virtually expressionless, the device is difficult to ignore. That is, it would be difficult to visualize what's under the mask, for which reason it poses an ongoing challenge to an able-bodied observer. Chen's mask does not allow a "coming out" that makes the able-bodied viewer feel comfortable; on the contrary, the mask's intrinsic strangeness produces comfort *for Chen*, but not for those who see them.

The productive strangeness of Chen's mask reworks Siebers' disability masquerade precisely by disrupting the visual comfort of the able-bodied viewer. In observing something like Chen's chemical respirator, viewers are unable to easily assimilate the sight within previously held understandings of the body. Where a prosthetic leg may fill in the visual gap left by an amputation, for instance, the mask changes how Chen's face might be read. So while perhaps the facial markers that tend to signify human expression (and therefore emotion) may disappear, the image of the chemical respirator is not so easily repressed. Chen's mask is a novel sight, and a

productive one for visualizing disability, but also one that depends on confirming visual signifiers.

Chen's hypervisible chemical respirator might be understood as a form of "cripping up," an element of disability masquerade through which disabled persons overproduce or oversignify their disabilities. While overvisibility is often "a term of disparagement aimed at minority groups who appear to be 'too much' for society to bear," Siebers reads such overstated performances as "small conspiracies against oppression and inequality . . . [by] seizing control of stereotypes and resisting the pressure to embrace norms of behavior and appearance" (118-119). In Siebers' formulation, performing or oversignifying the lived realities of disability works against the ideology of ability by demanding visibility in unconventional and nonconformist ways. Though "cripping up" in these instances is clearly a performance, it is a performance tied to and arising from corporeality, posing "a significant counterexample" to the theory of social construction (57).

But Chen is also "cripping up" *without* the aid of the chemical respirator, moving through public spaces unmasked in what they call a private "bodily concert of breath-holding, speech, and movement" that will be least damaging to their immune system (199). In their description of their movement through public spaces, Chen performs their complex embodiment in ways that do not appear visually legible. It is unlikely that anyone else on the street could stare at Chen because of their difference as the theorist "scoot[s] ahead to a clearer zone" while avoiding smokers and incense burners and perfume-wearers on the streets of Berkeley (199). It is likely that some careful observer might notice Chen cutting through public space quickly, but that they observer would read this as a performance of Chen's disability seems less likely. Nonetheless, Chen's "bodily concert" is a way of "cripping up" their relationship to public space. Moving at

unusual pace, pairing breath and movement, Chen's corporeality determines an alternative approach to visualizing public space and disabled movement through it. While the respirator oversignifies Chen's environmental illness as masquerade, their complex movements crip up the environment around them, shifting from visibility to visualization.

The presence of the disabled body in public is itself a tool for visualization. Disabled people use their disabilities as a masquerade both to ease the discomfort of stares and to engage them. As a hypervisibilizing technique, masquerade invites staring encounters, which are either ignored or broken-off, rendering the staree invisible once again, or are harnessed productively by both parties. Both Siebers and Garland-Thomson frame the masquerade and the staring encounter as facets of real disabled lives, but I wish to extend these techniques into narrative and performance products produced by persons with disabilities. Leveraging narrative and performance frame of the freak show, a genre built on the facilitation of staring encounters and disability as masquerade, Mat Fraser's works widen the visual field to accommodate disability, and in doing so makes pointed critiques about the pervasiveness of the ideology of ability within neoliberalism.

Fraser's one-man show begins with a painstaking recreation of Sealo the Sealboy's act. Set on a bare stage, with only a small table bearing the necessary props for Sealo's famous shaving routine, and backed by a full size freak show banner of Sealo the Sealboy, Fraser enters the stage with his back to the audience as a recording of a sideshow barker introduces Fraser-as-Sealo with the typical patter. The monologue hones in on the visual exchange that is about to take place. "You've paid to see 'em," the talker notes, "so let's get on with the show" (Fraser 1). This introduction inserts the nineteenth century freak show into a theatrical exercise of contemporary consumer vision. Of course, one always paid to see a freak show, as Robert

Bogdan notes well in *Freak Show: Exhibiting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit*, just as one always pays to attend professional theatre. Theatre, however, tends not to remind audience members of the fact that they've paid to participate in visual consumerism, relying instead on the fourth wall to produce a pristine experience of witnessing art rather than purchasing a commodified experience. The freak show, instead, was entirely clear about the performance of consumption, so to provide a theatrical audience with a reminder that they've paid to see begins to break down the boundaries of genre from the outset.

As the end of the spiel, Fraser-as-Sealo turns to face the audience and begins to deliver a lengthy monologue introducing Sealo the Sealboy, while executing his three most famous acts: the shaving routine, the sawing routine, and the cigar routine. Sealo's patter, reconstructed from Fraser's interviews with performers who knew and worked with Berent, replicates not only the style in which sideshow performances were historically delivered, but also the rhetoric by which it was framed. Barely 30 seconds into his patter, he says: "I am known by my professional name of Sealo the Sealboy -- so called because of an extremely rare medical condition that I have, known to Doctors and scientists as Phocomelia" (2). Sealo's language reiterates the medical gaze, naming his condition to educate the audience. While this rhetorical move does indeed make Sealo more visible, it also makes his body more knowable to the non-disabled audience, turning the naming of his disability into an act that ultimately serves to comfort or reassure the audience of their own normative status. The use of the medical gaze to heighten the difference between Sealo and his audience continues as he describes the precise anatomy of his body:

"Regular folks have three main bones in their arms, the humerus from the shoulder to the elbow, and the radius and ulna from the elbow to the wrist. Now, I don't have neither a radius nor ulna bone but I'm not sad folks, in fact I think it's pretty humerus, well, pretty

short, which some of you may find humorous, -- say, if you do find humerus, could you give it to me? Welcome to one of my famous ‘Sealoisms’ folks.” (2)

“I don’t have the power of a regular arm or elbow joint, so I have to literally put my back into it, using all the muscles in it down to my feet and up into my neck, and using this method I can successfully saw a piece of wood in half. (*Starts to saw; it is quite slow.*)

Say, maybe you’d like to hire me as a ‘handsies’ man? Just tell me what wood you want choppin’ for the Winter, and I’ll have it ready for October (*continues sawing for a while, then looks up at crowd*) . . . Next year!!” (3)

These passages focus on the mechanics of Berent’s physicality, explaining both the anatomy and physiology of his body and how it adapts to perform the normal, everyday tasks of shaving, sawing wood, and lighting cigars that make up Sealo’s stage routine. On the one hand, these descriptions of bone structure and musculature further enhance the medicalization of his body, on the other hand, that very knowability disrupted by Sealo’s continued patter. In both of the above instances, Sealo’s description of his embodiment gives way to a moment of what one might call “crip humor.” Crip humor is a kind of joke about disability that makes light of disabled experience, rather than mocking a person for being disabled. The jokes punch up, not down, and are generally crafted and spoken by persons with disabilities rather than the non-disabled. The corny jokes Sealo makes about finding his lack of a humerus humorous and the long process he’d endure if he were a “handsies” man for hire provide a more complex understanding of embodiment than the anatomical descriptions alone. Rather, Sealo’s jokes respond to his difference by recognizing it, and making fun of it, rather than categorizing it and understanding it. Further, the skillful use of puns (humerus/humorous) bolster the complexity of Sealo’s embodiment, verbally pointing to an embodiment that carries multiple meanings and

significations, ones which slip and slide depending on point of view. In short, the “Sealoisms” keep Berent’s disability from disappearing into a scientific catalogue, and redirect the audience’s focus onto the performer in front of them. As their nomenclature suggests, the “Sealoisms” mark Sealo the Sealboy as an individual with his own complex embodiment.

Sealo’s acts themselves are carefully constructed to manipulate and provoke staring encounters. The theatrical audience of *Sealboy-Freak* listens to Sealo’s introductory monologue as he proceeds to perform his acts. He shaves his face, without drawing attention to the act, while he explains that he’s missing a humerus bone, but then finishes the final shaving stroke “with a flourish” and “stylishly wipes [his] face” with a towel, bowing, and launching into a pitch for his souvenir cards (2). The juxtaposition of an actor’s monologue with a task exhibiting disability divides the audience’s attention. Though Sealo invites them to watch him shave, or saw wood, or light a cigar, he simultaneously draws their attention away from simply staring at the action he performs by requiring that they also listen to him speak. Sealo’s acts, as Fraser re-creates them, both provoke staring encounters, and transform them into experiences in which audience members engage with Sealo as a performer, rather than an exhibit. A combination of both auditory and visual stimuli, Sealo’s acts draw the audience in, and ignite dynamic responses to disability.

Fraser’s characterization of Berent is also keenly aware of how his acts manipulate staring encounters. In a later monologue, he describes his early days as a performer in dime museums, before his days in the circus sideshow:

“I had this bowl of water on the table, and a shaving brush and soap and a razor of course. First off, I’d soap up my face, then, instead of startin’ to shave, I’d pretend that I’d suddenly noticed the crowd, which is a joke, really I’d’ve already made a mental note

of which ones were gonna be easy to work, and which, if any were gonna be trouble. So I looked up, all shocked like I'd just seen the crowd for the first time, and I'd pick up the table with the bowl on it, it was a small table, and take it further into the museum, and the folks would always be interested by now, see how I was gonna shave myself with my handsies; I started to shave and they'd all be hooked." (8)

Sealo's monologue reveals a key moment in which a staring encounter is manipulated to provoke interactions. By pretending to not notice the crowd, and retreating away from them once he becomes aware of their attention, Sealo begins a dynamic staring encounter. He meets the stare, and awkwardly truncates it, which entreats the dime museum audience to follow him to another location to continue the encounter that had been cut off. While most certainly a ploy to curate audience interest (and therefore increase performance revenue), the strategy no less displaces and also manipulates a potentially oppressive gaze with a dynamic staring encounter from which both the performer and the crowd emerge with new knowledge. The crowd's desire to see the entire shaving routine is satisfied, and the performer gleans new information about how "cripping up" can be a strategic advantage.

The meticulous recreation of Stanley Berent's Sealo the Sealboy performances by an actor who shares his curious embodiment invites the audience to stare at history, and transforming the freak show itself from a framework for oppressive gazes into a conduit for ethical staring encounters. What *Sealboy-Freak* highlights through Fraser-as-Berent is that disability on the sideshow stage was masquerade, and as such had the possibility both to create vulnerable positions for persons with disabilities, and to magnify their visibility. Though historical evidence supports that many freak show performances merely reinforced the spectator's position of normalcy through an oppressive, medical gaze, Fraser's recreation of

Sealo's acts demands recognition and visibility for the history of disabled performance by emphasizing the freak show's conventional use of disability as masquerade.

The Sealo segments of the show are paralleled with Fraser playing a contemporary disabled actor called Tam Schrafer (a thinly-veiled version of himself, Mat Fraser). After Sealo finishes his act and bids the audience goodnight, 10-20 seconds of "fairground music" plays over the blackout, revealing Mat Fraser, still dressed as Berent, seemingly in mid-monologue. He stops in the middle of his dramatic delivery, and notices the audience, explaining, "I'm about to do an audition" (4). As Fraser goes on to explain the difficulties his character (whose name is only revealed at the end of the monologue via voice over from an unseen director) faces as an actor with a disability, he changes "out of Sealo's clothes and into another set for the audition" – time the action of changing clothes to the exact duration of the monologue (6). Just as Sealo's acts use stage patter to mitigate and redirect audience stares, Tam conjoins monologue and disrobing to the same effect. In making a disabled performance out of the act of undressing and redressing, Fraser crafts a new version of a sideshow performance, devoid of the narrative framework of the freak show. In doing so, he demonstrates that the work of an actor onstage is not rhetorically distinct from the work of a sideshow performer, highlighting the disability masquerade that goes into the production of both sideshow performances and contemporary disabled performance work.

At the same time, however, Tam's monologue speaks to the problem of compulsory able-bodiedness within performance. He laments, "It's just a general audition where they get to see what I look and should like which means it's a lot easier . . . for all of us, in so far as I don't have to worry about not fitting in to their blinkered image of a particular character, and their rejection being prejudicial, and they don't have to revolutionize their perception of who can inhabit a

character. I mean, god forbid that they should accept that their imagination has limits, let alone that they should go beyond those limits!” (4). Tam’s critique alleges that performance, particularly when it comes to Hollywood casting, is guided by a preference for able-bodiedness because actors, as blank canvasses, should have bodies that are universally representative.

In his 1995 study *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body*, Lennard J. Davis investigates the construct of the classical nude and its role in the ideology of ability, arguing that nudes, specifically in their statuary form, are in fact some of the most common representations of disability in the art world. However, art history has idealized these broken, amputated, and scarred marble bodies in such a way as to reconstruct their wholeness and erase the appearance of their disability. Davis draws the comparison between the Venus de Milo and a disabled woman’s description of her physical appearance, and suggests that although both of these bodies are visibly disabled, the institutionalization of the Venus de Milo as a beautiful object through the art historian’s lens has shifted our cultural perception away from being able to see the statue as a disabled body.

Davis also looks at stone figures in other parts of the classical world, reading the Medusa myth as an allegory for encounters with disability. Once a beautiful woman, cursed with ugliness for offending Athena, Medusa’s monstrous body was imbued with the power to turn people to stone with a glance. Like an encounter with the Gorgon Medusa, “The ‘normal’ person sees the disabled person and is turned to stone, in some sense, by the visual interaction” (132). This reading of the Medusa myth in relationship to disability is compelling for two reasons. In one sense, Davis’s reading clearly sets up visual interactions with disability as staring encounters, as it is only by looking Medusa directly in the eye that one might be turned to stone. In another sense, his reading complicates Garland-Thomson’s assessment of the function of the stare: rather

than allowing for mutual interaction, a staring encounter with Medusa is instead calcifying; the visual power of the disabled body cements the position of the “normal” person as its opposite, and reinforces the ideological position of able-bodied superiority, in effect turning it to stone.

The solidified position of disability within classical myth, coupled with art history’s tendency to reconstitute disabled bodies as whole, establishes a representational problem for disability within the visual and performing arts. Davis cites Martin Norden’s *Cinema of Isolation*, which details over 600 films that feature narratives about disability or characters with disability, proving that “the cinematic experience, far from including disabilities in an ancillary way, is powerfully arranged around the management and deployment of disabled and ‘normal’ bodies . . . [t]he inherent voyeuristic nature of film makes it a commodity that works by visualizing for viewers the body in attitudes that it is otherwise difficult to see” (Davis 153). Davis elaborates that, like the proliferation of sex and violence often shown on screen, the inclusion of disability narratives likewise commodifies the experience of the body in ways that ultimately enforce normalcy:

This normal ideal body is the one we see on the screen. It is the commodified body of the eroticized male or female star. This body is not actually the norm, but it is the fantasized, hypostatized body of commodified desire. In order to generate this body and proliferate its images, films have constantly to police and regulate the variety of bodily differences. These bodies are the modern equivalents of the nude Venuses, and to keep them viable, to think on and obsess about them, the Medusa body has constantly to be shown, reshown, placed, categorized, itemized, and anatomized. In short, we cannot have Sharon Stone without Linda Hunt; we cannot have Tom Cruise without Ron Kovic; we cannot have the fantasy of the erotic femme fatale’s body without having the sickened, disabled,

deformed person's story testifying to the universal power of the human spirit to overcome adversity. As Norden points out, when films about disabled people are made, more often than not the disabled characters get cured by the end of the film (1994, 59). The tension between the whole and the fragmented body, between the erotic, complete body and the uncanny, incomplete body, must be constantly deployed and resolved through films.

(Davis 154)

This tension is deployed and resolved through the body of the actor. Actor's bodies, as commodities, are valuable because of their essential plasticity: the skill and dexterity they employ in changing shape to suit a character. Extreme weight gain or loss, or other radical shifts in appearance gain accolades and recognition as dedication to craft.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, as Howard Sherman, director of the Alliance for Inclusion in the Arts, notes in a 2014 interview with disabled playwright Christopher Shinn, "Playing disability is considered a technical skill for an actor, and casting directors and producers prefer to seek non-disabled actors with long track records" (Shinn). Shinn, who became an amputee at the age of 38, problematizes this position. Paraphrasing the late disabled playwright John Belluso, Shinn argues that able-bodied actors playing disabled characters is "reassuring for the audience" because their familiarity with the actor's existing body of work reveals disability to be an illusion, and reinforces the narrative that disability can be magically transcended. Representing disability in this way enables "the lie of

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<sup>13</sup> I refer here specifically to Christian Bale, whose dramatic weight loss for his role in *The Machinist* was lauded as dedication to his craft, and to Natalie Portman, whose decision to shave her head for her role in *V for Vendetta* was also given public accolades. In thinking about actor's bodies as public commodities, however, it is crucial to note certain gendered perceptions that govern what an actor can do with his or her body. Male actors like Bale are applauded for weight loss or gain for a role, while female actors lose their value as public commodities if they do so. Though Charlize Theron won an Academy Award for her role in *Monster*, public reception to her weight gain and the "ugly drag" she underwent in the makeup chair to play serial killer Aileen Wuornos was unkind. Still, audiences were reassured to see Theron receive her award looking exactly as they expect her to.

representation,” allowing audiences to “simultaneously gawk and look away” from images of disability (Shinn).

As a result, the dominant cultural images of persons with disabilities tend to be played by able-bodied actors. Tobin Siebers refers to this form of casting as “disability drag,” and argues that it, too, is a complex valence of disability as masquerade – one which “represses disability and affirms the ideology of ability.” Siebers compares able-bodied actors in disabled roles to drag, citing that when a disabled actor “crips up,” the performance is often as “bombastic” in its representation of disability as a drag performance is of gender. “The modern cinema often puts the stigma of disability on display, except that films exhibit the stigma not to insiders by insiders, as is the usual case with drag, but to a general public that does not realize it is attending a drag performance. In short, when we view an able-bodied actor playing disabled, we have the same experience of exaggeration and performance as when we view a man playing a woman,” Siebers writes (115). As a result, exaggerating disability, or masquerading it, translates to audiences perceiving the disabled body “as a sign of the acting abilities of the performer – the more disabled the character, the greater the ability of the actor” (116). Acting, then, participates in the classic divisions of whole/incomplete bodies, and further enhances the “developmental fiction” of ability itself (Davis 130). By representing disability as drag, able-bodied viewers buy in to the ideology of ability, further enhancing disability as otherness.

Fraser’s work in *Sealboy-Freak* challenges the representation of disability as drag, both through the display of his own body, and through his “cripped up” performance as Berent. As Tam Schrafer, his thinly-veiled onstage self, Fraser critiques the reliance on disability drag as a failure of cultural imagination. He questions whether casting directors are just too “scared? Unimaginative? Complacent?” to cast persons with disabilities at all, and rehearses responses to

moments in which disabled performers are cast: “And anyone who does have a real vision of drama, that includes us a lot, hailed as either a visionary, a revolutionary genius, exciting and confrontational, or, a manipulative sensationalist, cruelly exploiting the freakish value of actual disabled people on stage, inappropriately cheapening the production yada yada yada” (4). Tam characterizes his position as a performer with a disability through this matrix of audience responses. Caught between being utterly ignored by casting agents, and denied agency by audiences, Tam calls this a “transition stage” that feels “awkward, ill-fitting, painful sometimes” (4). The language he uses to describe his position is viscerally linked to disabled embodiment. Out of sync with the built environment, disabled bodies do seem at times to be awkward, ill-fitting, or pained. Notably, however, Tam’s language shifts the experience of disability away from the body of the disabled person and onto culture at large. He metaphorically “crips” the ideology of ability to demonstrate that disability is not a static position but, to prove the “truism” Robert McRuer records in *Crip Theory*: “Sooner or later, if we live long enough (so we often say), we will all become disabled” (197).

Even so, Tam recognizes that the ideology of ability is deeply internalized – even by disabled performers like himself. While he critiques the limits of imagination, he admits that even he is caught off guard when he sees his body on film. Tam opines, “I think, ‘Fuck, those arms’ . . . Although mine and familiar, they’re even alien to ME when put into their rarest context, i.e. the performance mode . . . if even I have to do a little mental work to find it nonplussing, then what fucking chance’ve you got?” (5). Tam’s comments about the validity of his own body in performance contexts point to an internalized sense of ableism with which the disabled must grapple. Because actor’s bodies participate in the fiction of wholeness, at times disabled performers understand their bodies as limited to playing disabled roles, unable to

imagine representational possibilities outside of those provided by casting directors. Tam continues:

“Jeezus! Am I playing out some historical cliché, fulfilling one of the few roles given me by tradition? No! It’s not like that anymore . . . it can’t be . . . people are no longer more fascinated by how I do things rather than what I’m saying (*timed to be said precisely as he puts in the roach filter*) . . . I am an actor, not a fucking freak! (*Exactly as he lights joint – similarity to Sealó’s cigar lighting, and all eyes on this, contradicting what he’s saying.*)” (11)

By drawing a rhetorical parallel between the disabled actor engaging in the relaxing act of lighting a joint and Sealó’s cigar lighting act, Fraser poses a challenge to the representational limits for disabled performers. His stage directions indicate that he intends audiences to notice this parallel, stare at the action, and be moved to contemplate new possibilities. In her 2003 book *Bodies on Edge*, performance theorist Petra Kuppers asserts that *Sealboy-Freak* “opens up the instability of the representational system – instead of joining the discourse of the human and the animal, the child and the adult, the foreign and the familiar, this grotesque points towards an unmapped, uncharted terrain. But the power has a price: this performer has no clear contours – we cannot really see him” (47).

Kuppers dwells on the joint-lighting moment, the place that she alleges both opens up the instability of disabled representation, yet also somehow renders Fraser himself less visible. She argues that Fraser’s “re-vision” of disability does not “refashion a vision machine that allows for a subject position for the disabled person.” For Kuppers, this new kind of vision would break down the supposed naturalness of the “blind spot, that position that invisibilizes ‘normate’ bodies as originators of a specific gaze, and that keeps disabled people in their position of Otherness,

keeps them from aspiring to agency” (47). Her prose implies that Fraser’s monologue about the politics of the stage while rolling a joint does not succeed in re-envisioning disability because it hinges on calling forth the spectatorial gaze of the audience. In rhetorically aligning Berent’s freak show performance with Tam’s private and personal one, Fraser’s play suggests that the difference between the two acts, and the way they are viewed by a non-disabled audience, is only a temporal distinction. Koppers asks:

“What did the audience watch? The Berent-esque spectacle of rolling a joint, akin to Sealboy’s shaving or wood sawing, marveling at the facility of these ‘little handsies’? Or did they listen to Fraser’s critique, an actor who during his discourse engages in the nearly invisible act of getting ready to smoke: a conventionalized sign of theatre, often denoting contemplation and meditation? (47)

In questioning this moment, Koppers’ reads the rhetorical alignment of Fraser and Berent as replicating the kind of objectifying, oppressive gazing that solidifies the audience’s position of normalcy, effectively making Fraser-as-performance artist disappear.

Because this chapter attempts to think through ways of seeing disability, I wish to dwell for a moment on the critical notion of the blind spot. The blind spot is a normal part of human vision. In our inability to see past a certain point or at a particular angle, the human brain takes over to fill in these gaps in perception. We metaphorically use the blind spot to describe both the places we cannot see while driving (with either our eyes or our assistive mirrors) and the things we fail to see while thinking through complex issues. Blind spots, in the critical sense, are gaps in knowledge, but it is worthwhile to think about the appellation of blindness to these critical oversights. In my earlier analysis of Garland-Thomson’s formulation of the stare, I suggest that her description of stares as places where vision fails and must be restructured “re-visions” ways

of seeing disability by breaking down normal vision in order to accommodate new sights. The critical blind spot implies a model of vision that must be corrected in order for one's vision to be full or complete. It participates in the fiction of wholeness by delineating specific areas of deficiency that must be amended. It is the blind spot that Koppers aligns with the ideology of ability, a critical failure to ascribe subjectivity to persons with disabilities. But by drawing on this phrase, Koppers own language skews ableist. Her reading of Fraser's "lack of contours" in the joint-lighting moment implies that this action reinforces the able-bodied audience's blind spot, continuing to see Fraser as a freak rather than an agent. By playing into this blind spot, Koppers implies that Fraser's critique then falls on deaf ears – to borrow another disability metaphor. Because the audience is watching Fraser roll a joint, Fraser himself is unseen and unheard. Blindness, in Koppers formulation, continues to be an unideal position.

But perhaps Fraser's disappearing act isn't meant to enhance the power of the blind spot, but to instead blind the audience. In considering an alternative valence to blindness, I want to consider blinding another as an action that temporarily or permanently shifts ways of seeing. To be blinded, even temporarily, means that the field of vision radically changes, so much so that "normal" sight is replaced by alternative, disability-inspired modes of perception – some of which may not be visual at all. I read Fraser's joint-rolling speech not as an act in which he disappears under the audience's gaze, but an act through which he temporarily blinds them. The juxtaposition of Fraser's words ("I'm an actor, not a fucking freak!") with his modernized version of Sealó's cigar act summons the audience to investigate what they are seeing. Fraser's stage directions highlight the contradiction between his words and his actions, manipulating audience vision and effectively blinding them to everything but the subtle work of his hands, shrinking the visual field to focus on his hands rolling the joint.

But Fraser doesn't let the audience dwell on this moment for too long. He continues to speak about the differences in the history of disabled performance for a minute more, and then launches, suddenly, into a punk-flavored song that critiques the representational history of disability. The radical shift from the narrow visual focus on the act of preparing the joint to the auditory spectacle of the song enacts a reworking of vision through a disability lens. By narrowing the audience's focus to the joint, Fraser reworks the blind spot to become a place of focus – a way of seeing in blindness. This narrowing invites the audience to stare, to rework their vision in order to see representational history. But once this vision becomes clear, Fraser shifts the focus to another sense and challenges the audience to see his critique by hearing it. Perhaps Koppers is right to say that Fraser himself becomes invisible in these moments, but it is by making himself difficult to see that he troubles the visual rhetoric of ability.

The joint-rolling moment also presents a significant reworking of disability as masquerade, especially when coupled with Fraser's own invocation of "disability drag" through his portrayal of Berent. Though Siebers' definition of "disability drag" refers specifically to non-disabled actors playing disabled characters, conceptualizing disability as masquerade also allows for representation that is performative or hyperstylized by persons with disabilities. I align this type of disability drag as a performance akin to female-female impersonation.<sup>14</sup> If drag as a performance genre points out that gender is a construct, then the female drag queen makes herself seem artificially feminine by oversignifying her gender identity through costume, makeup, hair extensions, and other gender performatives. Fraser's performance as Seal the Sealboy functions like a female drag performance: in "cripping up" as Seal and calling extra

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<sup>14</sup> Examples of female drag queens: Michelle Visage, RuPaul's right-hand woman on *RuPaul's Drag Race*; Kitten La Rue, the female-presenting half of camp-drag dance duo Kitten'n'Lou; emcee The World Famous \*BOB\*; Dolly Parton.

attention to his disability, Fraser critiques the kind of disability drag typically practiced by able-bodied actors, while also acknowledging that the lived experience of disability is, in and of itself, a masquerade.

Fraser's particular iteration of disability drag relies on his status as a "born freak," a term which productively holds the social construction of freakishness in tension with the material reality of Fraser's body. Fraser's "born freak" performance also turns on this paradox. While the "born" emphasizes the materiality of Fraser's body, its use in combination with "freak" signifies that Fraser's work is no less a construction that reveals and transforms ways of thinking about being disabled and being in disability. His "born freak" performance works are extensions of his complex embodiment, and as such reveal the complex histories and lived realities of disabled embodiment. As a "born freak," Fraser's meticulous recreation of Stanley Berent's freak show acts are the representational tools through which he articulates both aspects of disability masquerade. As a disabled man playing another disabled man, Fraser's work as an actor challenges representations of disability by able-bodied actors. His body demonstrates that disability is not drag one can put on, while simultaneously showing how disabled persons in fact do masquerade their disabilities every day. The joint-rolling moment that Petra Kuppers critiques as clouding Fraser's visibility also makes perfectly clear that the performative act of Sealó lighting a cigar and the everyday act of Tam rolling a joint are in fact both performances of disability. Though ostensibly both actions show the ability and dexterity of the performer, each also translates the everyday into a public performance. As both acts happen on stage, in a theatrical context, they illustrate that disabled bodies constantly engage in public performances of disability in order to be seen. Under the lens of disability drag, Fraser crystalizes the notion of masquerade as a facet of disabled performance.

Kuppers argues that Fraser's "citation of the freak show spectacle provides reasons for the failure of the disabled body to be engaged in social performance" (47). Indeed, by juxtaposing the work of Seal the Freak and Tam the Actor, *Sealboy-Freak* does seem to argue that the historical framework of the freak show trained audiences to read performers as "a non-human other, not as an act," and that this position makes communicating problematic. If the audience views the performer as an animal, communicating at all becomes "the point of wonder" and any other message gets lost. "The image of the freak is too stable, too stabilized in social discourse, to enter easily into 'theater,'" Kuppers claims (47). However, to accept the freak as a stable position within social discourse removes the very rhetorical power upon which the freak-as-other is built. The freak, as Elizabeth Grosz theorizes, exists on or at the limits of knowability. It operates from a position of ambiguity that is inherently unstable, which creates the draw of novelty and wonderment. Additionally, Fraser's citation of the freak show in his presentation of disabled performance history also claims the freak show itself as a theatre of disability, highlighting the performative work that fueled the genre. Berent himself was a vocal advocate for the recognition of disabled performance within freak shows. As freak performance significantly declined in the U.S. in the late 1950s, Berent lobbied for his right to work, specifically calling attention to his work as performance (Hartzman).

By playing Berent and re-creating his classic sideshow acts, Fraser claims a space for disabled bodies within theatre. His "born freak" performances within *Sealboy-Freak*, as well as his solo performance work at the Coney Island Circus Sideshow, make his disabled body into a hypervisible spectacle, inviting stares, provoking wonder, and posing radical revisions to the ideology of ability within the performing arts. "Born freak" performance is only one way in which Fraser's work employs disability masquerade to as a critical tool. His deliberate gestures

toward the materiality of his body do, at some level, widen the visual fields of his able-bodied audience members, enabling them to visualize disability as central to experience. Fraser's work makes productive use of his audience's capacity for sight, and revises their vision through selective focus, blinding and illuminating all at once.

But *Sealboy-Freak's* capacity to visualize is dependent on reworking the sightlines of an able-bodied viewer. Though much of the text speaks to how Fraser sees himself, and how he grapples with the ideology of ability in his own self-visioning, *Sealboy-Freak's* claim to radical embodiment is contextually dependent on the visual codes of the sideshow in order to do this work, both criticizing these visual schemas as well as endorsing them. Though Fraser is most certainly directing the audience's gaze, he directs them through movements and actions that they, as visual consumers, will recognize. Like the historical freak, Fraser has to "flaunt" his difference in order to subvert perception – and it is this flaunting that Eli Clare finds troubling.

In his consideration of performers who reclaim the word freak (and freak performance), Clare writes: "In our search for liberation, we can sometimes turn the language and symbols most closely reflecting our oppression into powerful expressions of pride. And yet that equation sometimes betrays history, blurring the difference between witness and pride" (98). Clare's uneasiness with freak aesthetics and with the term itself is located not only in the audience's gaze, but in the question of which freaks had the right to flaunt their disabilities with pride, and which ones did not. Though Michael M. Chemers and others wish to argue for the total agency of historical freaks in the construction of their performances, Clare, along with Rachel Adams and Christina Sharpe, have significant reservations about such claims when it comes to freaks of color or freaks with developmental disabilities. In *Exile & Pride*, Clare poses rhetorical questions to some historical freaks, wondering if William Henry Johnson (also known as Zip-the-What-Is-

It?) took off his monkey suit at night and sang songs in his tent with other performers; if Ann Thomson, The Armless Wonder, learned to knit for her act, or if she had always known; and if Hiram Davis, a “Wild Man of Borneo,” ever stopped mid-performance to “*stare back, turning your mild and direct gaze back on the rubes gawking the gawkers, entertained by you own audience?*” (77, 74, 82). In questioning these historical figures, Clare offers to let persons with disabilities speak for themselves, filling in aspects of sideshow history that are often written over by the narratives on pitch cards and stories told by showrunners.

Clare is quite right to note how little the voices of certain freaks – especially non-white and cognitively disabled freaks – are witnessed in this history, and how difficult it is to suggest that they, too, could flaunt their disabilities in the same way that Stanley Berent could. Fraser’s ability to “flaunt,” and to flaunt through the aesthetic practices of the freak show, seem more possible because of his relative closeness to the normate position as a white, heterosexual man. It is compelling to read Fraser’s *Sealboy-Freak* as a way to bear witness to history and flaunt his disability with pride, providing answers to Clare’s rhetorical questions. But to read the performance this way also leaves many questions unanswered. Fraser’s ability to flaunt does not necessarily equal William Henry Johnson’s ability to flaunt.

Yet these historical questions about agency and flaunting nonetheless seem to inform Fraser’s choice to harness the freak show as a narrativizing framework that extends ongoing conversations about the agency of disabled bodies. In “Crippling It Up,” he writes:

When I started this work in 2000, I was the only congenitally deformed performer working there, and it was still considered by the so-called knowledgeable, to be ‘the pornography of the disabled’. Now, thirteen years later, many disabled people are coming to this art form as a way of expressing themselves in a performance arena that doesn’t

judge them automatically as lesser, other, and invalidated, but that pays them, gives them a platform on which to express themselves, and encourages exploration of their self-identity. Indeed, a new phrase has emerged to describe freak shows' relationship to disabled people, 'The new rock'n'roll'. Fraught with complications as it is, it is a refreshing alternative to the liberal funded box ticking confined Disability Arts work.

(247)

Fraser positions his work as a challenge to the "box-tickling" inclusivity of neoliberalism, which, like masquerade, performs the dual function of identifying disability while simultaneously rendering it invisible. Fraser's critique of the "liberal funded box ticking" frames disability arts as a commodity for neoliberal consumption that bears no necessary relation to the labor of the disabled bodies who produce it. By comparison, the freak show places the labor of disabled people front and center, forcing audiences to confront alternative labor values. By "cripping up the scene," Fraser uses the familiar aesthetics of the freak show to insert his crip politics into spaces where he can "intervene and force reconsideration on a nightly basis with audiences who would never knowingly come to see what they might perceive as Disability Arts" (247). It isn't enough, Fraser suggests, to flaunt disability in the expected places. Doing so, while productive in some ways, also continues to put disabled bodies to work producing and consuming the same types of images that are already "incorporated into contemporary economies" of seeing disability (McRuer 179).

Mat Fraser's 2012 striptease performance, "The Arms," productively "crips up" a non-disabled space. Created for Crip-tease, a burlesque festival celebrating the disabled body, which was staged both in New York and London, "The Arms" cleverly reverses the functionality of prostheses to unravel the medical/observational gaze and visualize radical embodiment. It

eschews the tropes of the freak show, but nonetheless incorporates Fraser's "born freak" aesthetics in ways that centralize his working, sexual disabled body. Through the medium of striptease, he visualizes disability as desirable, desiring, and creatively productive.

In "The Arms," Fraser wears two prosthetic forearms, complete with hands, over his "little handsies." This is apparent to an audience familiar with Fraser's body and his work, but perhaps goes unnoticed by the uninitiated. The arms are covered by a black suit jacket, with matching black trousers, a button down dress shirt, and a pair of loafers (no socks). Fraser struts onto the stage, the arms stiff at his sides, bobbing his head along to the sounds of Fabolous and Missy Elliot's track, "Oops (Oh My)." He begins by kicking off his loafers. First, in an exaggerated tendue, he jettisons the left shoe from his foot. Then, he prepares to kick off the right loafer, drawing his right foot up his left calf in something of a pas de cheval. He flexes from the knee as if to kick off the shoe, but doesn't release. He repeats the motion and sends the shoe flying as he turns around. Fraser performs a series of small hops toward upstage center. Rather than planting himself there to execute the next clothing removal, he remains sideways and in three small hops downstage, effectively shimmying his way out of his pants as the chorus of the song kicks in: "Oops! There goes my shirt, over my head." His trousers pool around his ankles, and Fraser high kicks his way out of each pant leg. With his left foot, Fraser sweeps his discarded trousers off the stage and proceeds to do a box strip as he shimmying his shoulders, the arms dangling uselessly at his sides the entire time, barely responsive to the kinetic energy Fraser is providing. He makes his way to stage right, extends his left leg, and bends down to trace his plastic hands over his shinbone, knee, and thigh. As he straightens himself up, he turns again toward center stage and walks in a circular motion while shimmying his left shoulder up and down, dislodging the jacket in the process. As the shoulder of his white button down shirt is

exposed, Fraser coyly looks back at the audience, wearing a pout. He whips his head to the opposite side, his torso following suit, and repeats the shoulder shimmy to remove the right side of the jacket. With his back to the audience, Fraser continues to shimmy the jacket off of the arms. As it begins to slide off Fraser's body, two things strike the audience as unusual. First, he is wearing a short sleeved dress shirt. Second, the plastic, prosthetic nature of Fraser's curiously immobile arms is now abundantly clear.

As Fraser turns to face the audience, his prosthetic arms come into focus. The arms reveal themselves to be a fiction, a gaff: framed by the line of Fraser's shirtsleeves, it is easy to see where his own short arms rest inside the plastic shells. The arms do have some semblance of an elbow joint; they are not as functionless as Fraser's choreography has made them appear, but they do seem nonetheless cumbersome. Small slits in the upper arm attachment suggest an interior lever that Fraser's real hands would use to control the function of the elbow from inside the casing. Below the joint, the arms have a fleshier appearance. Their color appears closer to tan, almost matching the tanned skin on Fraser's thighs, where the rigid upper arms literally pale in comparison.

With a smirk on his face, Mat Fraser stands downstage center and begins to swing his useless prostheses back and forth, rocking on the balls of his feet as the plastic arms cut through the air in perfectly straight lines. After a few swings, Fraser launches the arms upward and utilizes the elbow function for the first time to rest his fake plastic hands on either side of his head, framing his face with the arms in a position reminiscent of a lingerie model running his or her hands through his or her own hair. He bumps his hips from side to side as he holds the arms against his face, and then begins to swing them across his body, launching one arm behind his head with the prosthesis dangling over his shoulder. Fraser aggressively pivots his torso twice to

make the prosthesis flap around before releasing the arm from behind his head. He then repeats the move on the opposite side of his body and stalks across the stage with the arm both securely behind his head and dangling precariously over his chest.

After releasing the arm, Fraser finds himself at center stage and thrusts his left arm between his thighs. Squeezing the arm with his thighs, he pulls from his shoulder twice, and pauses. He looks out at the audience and pouts, suggesting that his own arm is stuck inside the prosthesis. But just as he releases a breath from his pursed lips, Fraser's own "little handsie" slides out of its prosthetic cage, covered in a white sock. Fraser opens his legs and unceremoniously lets the arm fall to the floor. As he walks away from the arm, he draws his sock-covered hand up to his lips, grasps the sock between his teeth, and slips his hand out. Fraser takes the sock from his mouth, holds it up to his nose, and inhales deeply. He removes the sock from his face and holds it in his hand for a moment, looking out at the audience with a decidedly come-hither stare and suggestively licking his bottom lip. As they cheer, he tosses the sock aside and turns away from them.

Fraser then returns to center stage and grasps the other prosthetic with his thighs. His music skips for a moment and the audience collectively lets out an "aww" of disappointment. Fraser, however, doesn't miss a beat, and draws their attention back to the task at hand. With his free hand, Fraser gestures to the hunk of plastic between his legs and leans his head back as he tries again to free his own arm from the device. Fraser leans forward again, and snarls at the audience as he pops his hand out of the prosthetic sleeve. This time, Fraser does a little shimmy with his hips before he springs backward with his legs open to drop the arm onstage. With both prosthetics out of the way, Fraser saunters downstage and begins to peel the white sock off his recently freed hand with his long, agile fingers. He executes a series of step-touches as he slides

off the sock beat by beat. His face offers a sense of relief as he displays his uncovered hands and tosses the sock behind him without a care.

Fraser then begins to circle the stage while unbuttoning his shirt, offering the audience a cheeky grin as he undoes button after button. With his back to the audience, he tosses the shirt off his left shoulder in time with the song's chorus. Finally, there goes his shirt! He extends his tongue and licks the top of his shoulder, turns away from the audience again and shimmies the shirt down to his hands, where he releases it from his right side and uses his left arm to toss the shirt around in the air a bit before discarding. Now clad only in a red spandex thong, Fraser turns back to the audience, his hands resting over his pectoral muscles to playfully hide his nipples from the audience. With his hands on his chest, he executes a couple of belly dance isolations, manipulating his muscles so that they ripple his stomach, seemingly on their own accord. He then turns his attention to house left, where he places himself and stares out into the crowd as he flicks his right hand away from his chest, revealing his nipple. Fraser runs to the other side of the stage as the audience cheers, and slides his hand away from his other nipple. As he saunters back to center stage, he slowly licks the top of each of his arms, and then raises his arms above his head to lick his triceps, after which he places the fingers of his left hand into his mouth and proceeds to suck on them with his eyes closed. As Fraser works his left hand deeper and deeper into his mouth, pushing the fingers further in with the help of his right hand, he opens his legs wider and wider, rocking on his heels.

Fraser ejects his hand from his mouth, and falls forward, as though he had been gagging on his own hand. He grins at the audience as he wipes his saliva-covered hand across his chest, and then dips down into a deep plie. He laces his fingers together across his chest and begins to scuttle forward, holding the plie, while he makes a waving motion with his arms and consistently

flicks his tongue out at the audience. The light glints off his red thong with the same speed as Fraser's tongue. On the song's final chord, Fraser stands erect for a moment, and then drops down into a perfect front split, his arms crossed in front of him in satisfaction.

If prosthetic devices participate in creating the narrative of ability-as-lack and the developmental fiction of wholeness (as Davis discusses), Fraser's work in "The Arms" lays this fiction bare. The narrative arc of Fraser's burlesque performance quite literally strips away the layers of artifice that "cover up" his disability, ending in a celebratory reveal of his nearly-nude disabled body in which he amplifies both his desirability and his own sexual desire. Burlesque, as a theatrical genre, is built on the consensual invitation of scopic pleasure. Audiences are invited to stare, and be stared back at. Its simple narrative structure, surrounding strategic concealment and revelation, of the body itself, ultimately celebrates both the corporeal and the performative. For a performer with a disability like Fraser to narrativize his body through burlesque works against the impulse to exploit disability for narrative sympathy, and instead asks audience members to visualize Fraser as both sexually desirable and sexually desiring. When Fraser removes his clothing, he neither compensates for any perceived lack, nor presents any moral or spiritual weakness. Rather, the act of removing his clothing instead strips away the artifice of prosthesis (in the narrative and literal senses) to claim a space for Fraser's body itself. It is clear from his facial expressions of smirks and smiles, and from his eroticized movements, that the act of bearing his body in an eroticized context is very much an act that brings him pleasure, as well. He is both subject and object of sexualized gazing in his performance, and his disabled body is a critical site of resistance against narrative prosthesis.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder describe the function of the disabled body in literature as "narrative prosthesis." The term suggests that prosthetic devices, both in literature and life, "accomplish an illusion" of compensating for what is "lacking, unfunctional, or inappropriately functional" and restore the body to "an

Fraser makes a great show of casting aside the literal prosthesis he dons in “The Arms,” a gesture that critiques the symbolic uses of prosthetics in the creation of disability as masquerade. In *Disability Theory*, Tobin Siebers notes that prosthetic devices are treated as invisible for the able-bodied public. Rather than viewing the prosthesis as compensating for a lack of ability, devices like “[s]tairs, elevators, escalators, washing machines, leaf and snow blowers, egg beaters, chainsaws, and other tools . . . are nevertheless viewed as natural extensions of the body, and no one thinks twice about using them” (31). Such technologies are not thought of as assistive devices, yet they do indeed assist human beings to complete tasks that would otherwise require an extensive amount of labor or creative adaptation to physical surroundings. These common technologies function for able-bodied people as assistive devices do for the disabled community: they make navigating the world easier. However, the ideology of ability demands that persons with disabilities operate at peak physical performance at all times. Because this performance standard is based on that of an able-bodied individual, the moment a person with a disability requires an assistive device to make life easier, the devices themselves become viewed as “expensive additions, unnecessary accommodations, and a burden on society” (31).

“The Arms” deliberately contradicts the demands of the ideology of ability. Because the arms that Fraser uses in this piece are less functional for the everyday task of clothing removal than his own short arms are, the dance revises the notion that prosthetic intervention makes Fraser’s life any easier. The choreography makes clear that the arms are largely functionless, leaving Fraser to invent creative solutions by which to remove his clothing. By eschewing the use of his hands for the removal of all of his clothing items except the shirt, Fraser creates what

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acceptable degree of difference” (6-7). In doing so, prosthetics erase difference altogether. Narrative prosthesis highlights the ways in which prosthesis fails to return the body to wholeness, symbolically exploiting difference within narratives to emphasize the multiple “otherness” of the disabled body.

might be called a choreography of creative accommodation. Burlesque choreography tends to rely on quick-release costuming tricks – snaps, snap tape, zippers, or even magnets – to make the removal of costume items a smooth and easy process. It would be feasible for Fraser to have incorporated any of these quick release techniques into his costume and choreography, and yet he does not. Fraser’s approach to burlesque in “The Arms” is instead based on creative accommodations for his short arms – other than the absurd plastic arms that cover them. His application of the shimmy as a clothing removal technique repurposes an eroticized movement into a pedestrian one, deliberately confusing the way in which the act should be viewed. Is this Fraser’s seduction of his audience? Or is it merely the way he always takes off his clothes? Clearly, Fraser is not a “genderless, asexual undesirable,” as persons with disabilities are often considered (Clare 112). Instead, by performing the everyday act of removing clothing through the eroticized language of burlesque, Fraser makes his gender and sexuality quite clear. In shimmying off his rather quotidian clothes, the audience is blinded by the suggestion that this might be how he always takes off his clothes, heightening the erotic dimension of Fraser’s body. This speaks, perhaps, to how he visualizes himself, and enables his viewers to visualize a day-to-day life for a disabled person as one in which sexuality is present. In short, his choreography, and presence as a striptease performer, works against the ableist notion that persons with disabilities are “de-eroticized” (Davis 128). Indeed, as viewers stare at Fraser’s striptease performance, they are “seduced” into an attention crisis, beginning the dynamic engagement Garland-Thomson claims. The performance genre of burlesque, and its attendant movement vocabulary, are key tools through which Fraser critiques the limits of prostheses in creating the illusion of ability, and allow him to claim space as an erotic subject, both desirable and desiring.

“The Arms” fruitfully “tinkers” with the “powerful symbolic connection” between disability and prosthesis to shift the social meaning of disability (Siebers 110). Although I have been clear to highlight how Fraser’s choreography focuses on his own physical ability, I have carefully called his applications of burlesque movement vocabulary a “creative accommodation.” My phrasing aligns Fraser’s movements with the kind of ingenuity that goes into creating structures that accommodate persons with disabilities, rather than suggesting that Fraser’s own movements are superior to those of the prostheses. I do this to ground Fraser’s work in the lived contexts of disability, and to avoid further entrapping him in a problematic narrative prosthesis. Frequently, stories surrounding the relationship between disability and prosthesis create heroes that are simultaneously cripple and supercripple. When prosthetically-enhanced ability is narrativized as superhuman embodiment, it too “creates a persona for its protagonist that masquerades what disability is” (112). Siebers terms this the “pathology of superiority,” which marks a shift in narrative prosthesis that “serves to conflate pathology with claims of exceptional talent” (113). While I do find Fraser to be an exceptionally talented writer and performer, this is not a conclusion I have drawn based on false narratives about the prosthetic function of his disability. On the contrary, Fraser’s work in both “The Arms” and *Sealboy-Freak* is highly critical of both pathologized superiority and its paradoxical opposite in pathologized weakness. Indeed, his deliberate reduction of functionality in his plastic arms disavows any claim about enhanced ability. Rather than use the arms to remove his clothing, Fraser chooses simple, embodied movements to disrobe, and then utterly transforms the arms from assistive devices into flapping dead weight, implying that prostheses are, at best, aesthetic crutches that must be repurposed by persons with disabilities.

Fraser's abandonment of his prosthesis, and the symbolic abandonment of disability as narrative prosthesis, offer ways of visualizing disability from the perspective of a disabled person. His performance does not seem specifically crafted for an able-bodied gaze. In its abandonment of technological prostheses, "The Arms" revises the disciplinarity inherent in the observational gazes that mediate freak show interactions. The piece does not easily settle into the freak/normate binary; though there is a distinction between the spectators (who remain clothed) and Fraser (who does not), the uncovering of Fraser's body does not reinforce the normality of the audience, but rather heightens Fraser's desirability and, simultaneously, makes visible his desire. I suggest, in fact, that the way audiences see Fraser in the context of "The Arms" is entirely through his own self-visualization. In creating a striptease act that blends the everyday creative accommodations disabled persons perform with the erotic language of burlesque, Fraser offers a new visual framework for seeing disability. "The Arms" is a disability-centric vision of embodiment – one that both critiques the ideology of ability and posits visualization as an alternative to disciplinary looking.

The performances analyzed in this chapter offer two types of challenges to the contemporary neoliberal modes of seeing disability. In *Crip Theory*, Robert McRuer suggests a "crip eye for the normate guy . . . would mark a critically disabled capacity for recognizing and withstanding the vicissitudes of compulsory able-bodiedness" (197). *Sealboy-Freak* works within and pushes against the visual modalities of the freak show in order to flaunt, masquerade, and crip up disability history for a presumably able-bodied audience, producing something similar to McRuer's "crip eye for the normate guy." By reframing the audience's vision, Fraser's engenders a capacity to recognize complex embodiment, and more completely visualize the kinds of flexibility required by the ideology of ability. "The Arms," on the other hand, I would

posit simply as seeing disability with a “crip eye.” In one sense, a normate person visualizing disability in the way Fraser constructs it must always see disability through a “crip eye for the normate;” in another sense, the visual representation of disability in “The Arms” is not explicitly *for* “the normate guy,” and offers instead a critically disabled way of seeing and being in the world.

**CHAPTER FOUR:****POSTMODERN FREAK SHOWS: AN AMERICAN HORROR STORY**

“We accept her. One of us.  
 We accept her. One of us.  
 Gooble gobble. Gooble gobble.  
 We accept her. We accept her.  
 Gooble gobble. One of us.”  
 – *Freaks* (1932)

In her 2016 presentation at the Pop Culture Association’s national conference, Circus & Circus Studies chair Stacey Mascia-Suscie framed the inclusive casting of Ryan Murphy’s *American Horror Story: Freak Show* as a boon to disability representation, saying that the show’s drive toward collectivity and inclusion proved “we are all one under the big top of humanity.” This ideologically charged sentiment identifies the circus as a space of unlimited pluralism. It imagines a venue in which acrobats, equestrians, clowns, aerialists, jugglers, magicians, freaks, animals and more coexist, simultaneously uniting extreme feats of human ability with the presentation of disability. The performers, of course, are only half of this pluralist imagining. As the traditional opening salvo of the circus suggests, ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, and children of all ages are united in their desire to view the circus. The circus was also

a space in which people of any class position could attend, though in the early twentieth century circuses became firmly associated with middle and working class entertainment.

In its “come one, come all” mentality, the circus seems fundamentally American. It, too, holds the key tension of extreme individualism (in valuing the feats of its performers), while simultaneously emphasizing its diverse plurality on several levels. The circus itself, then, is a worthwhile site through which to think about America’s national character and the complexities of national belonging. In claiming “we are all one under the big top of humanity,” Mascia-Suscie reads the circus and circus culture through the rhetoric of neoliberal multiculturalism. Multiculturalism has been widely critiqued on the basis that the “melting pot” ideology at its core fails to recognize structural inequities. As Robyn Weigman writes in *Object Lessons*, “multiculturalism upended differences by making them all the same” (36). “[T]he big top of humanity” serves a similar rhetorical function as the melting pot, offering a canopy under which all who enter it can reside as one, regardless of race, class, gender, sexuality, or ability – at least for the duration of the show.

Mikhail Bakhtin’s analysis of the carnivalesque and Victor Turner’s related concept of liminality have both been taken up in circus studies (and performance studies) to articulate the lasting power of the circus and its related forms. No doubt, the etymological link between circuses and carnivals has informed this analysis. Though Bakhtin refers to *carnivale*, the topsyturvy time that precedes the Lenten season, the Oxford English Dictionary traces *carnival* as a referent to circuses and fairground events since only the 1920s, becoming synonymous with circus after its use in Jane Littell’s 1933 novel, *Carnival Girl*. Circus, according to the OED, was a much more general term for a performance arena with seats dating back to Ancient Rome. The modern definition of “a circular arena surrounded by tiers of seats, for the exhibition of

equestrian, acrobatic, and other performances” as well as “the company or ‘troupe’ of performers and their equipage” dates back to 1781. Now standard usage names the circus as both the physical space and the people who perform in it, whereas the carnival is only confined to the space itself.

Bakhtin’s use of carnival, however, encompasses far more than its location. The carnivalesque reconfigures public space, if only for the liminal period of ritual time in which the carnival takes place. “In fact, carnival does not know footlights,” Bakhtin writes, “in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators. Footlights would destroy a carnival, as the absence of footlights would destroy a theatrical performance. Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people” (7). Bakhtin qualifies this erasure of spatial and social boundaries (and of any boundary between audience and actor) as the carnivalesque’s “utopian character” which signifies the liberatory potential in the “temporary suspension” of hierarchies of everyday life (33, 10). Clearly, Bakhtin’s utopian carnivalesque is also bound up in “We are all one under the big top of humanity,” formulating the circus and its protective big top as a liminal space for liberation.

But the presence of freak shows and sideshows trouble the utopian reading of the circus. By its very design, the freak show puts pressure on the distance between normative audiences and the freaks on display. The performance of embodied difference onstage effectively assures the masses of their own unremarkable qualities, enabling any differences among them to congeal into a perceived equality, secure in the knowledge that they are not the freakish other. Sideshows were likewise physically separated from the rest of the circus attractions, usually placed in a smaller tent on the margins of the lot, heightening the difference between the main circus acts in

the big tent and the lesser acts of the sideshow. Circus historian Janet Davis also notes that sideshows were temporally separated from the main circus. Entire towns would shut down for “circus day,” gathering in the sideshow tent “an hour before each big-top production” went up (Davis 3). As the popularity of sideshows began to wane at the midcentury, the divide between audiences and freaks grew seemingly larger. Audiences “simply stopped going,” Thomas Fahy claims, due to the genre’s inability to “adapt to early twentieth century anxieties about the body” (153). These shifting attitudes toward the presentation of human difference, combined with a rapidly changing entertainment industry, put the freak show “on the ropes,” even as the circuses that hosted them remained popular and financially solvent (Bogdan 67). Though we may all be “one under the big top of humanity,” the decline of the freak show as a feature of circuses suggest that there are limits to that humanity.

In his book *Staging Stigma: A Critical Examination of the American Freak Show*, Michael M. Chemers ponders the limits of the “freaktopia,” citing Utopian philosopher Ernst Bloch’s readings of early freak shows as spaces that provided opportunity for *vor-schein* (anticipatory illumination) in their audiences (138). Garland-Thomson certainly suggests that by engaging in dynamic staring encounters, freak shows as a performance genre can create this kind of illumination in audiences about their own responses to disability. Nancy Bombaci further reads the “heterotopia” of freak shows as a carnivalesque inversion that “inverts and restructures conventional values,” providing a utopian allure to normate spectators (7). However, these readings of freak shows posit a utopic space in which there is still a divide between actor and audience, rather than a shared sense of equality between the two parties. Yet, more troubling is the historical fact that freak show as a utopian space elides the distinction between freaks and norms, precisely the fiction that allows for the appropriation of the freak show by “norms” in

service of their own ontological inquiry. Bombaci lauds this appropriation as the result of seeking “an expanded consciousness through the emulation of marginalized people,” and that this appropriation is “not an act of capitalist oppression or psychological dominance, but a means of identifying with those rejected by the cultural mainstream” (7-8). Chemers, leaning more toward a freak-centric model of utopia, suggests that “freaktopia” may be possible for those who have been represented as freaks (women, queers, persons with disabilities), which my earlier chapters have argued is possible through the adoption of the aesthetics of freakery. However, the adoption and extension of these “freaktopic” ideals to non-marginalized “norms” harms the freak show’s potential for repair as a genre form, both in performance and in literary and filmic representation.

Much work in what could be considered “freak studies” deals with texts and performance practices that would be classified as either *modernist* in their aesthetics or *modern* in terms of their periodicity. Thomas Fahy, Nancy Bombaci, and Rachel Adams, for example, focus on freak show narratives in Carson McCullers, Willa Cather, William Faulkner, John Dos Passos and others who easily fit into the modernist cannon, as well as photography and cinema such as Tod Browning’s *Freaks* and FSA photography. My work in this dissertation consciously sets up relays between the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and contemporary, postmodern texts and practices. These relays are intended to think about the ways in which postmodernity takes up and transforms its historical antecedents, and posit inquiries as to the value of these transformations. This methodology asserts that postmodern freak show narratives are distinct from their modernist predecessors, which may be, as Thomas Fahy infers, due to modernist auteurs’ proximity to actual freak shows, rather than imagined (or reimagined) versions of them.

The double politics of legitimation and subversion that motivate Linda Hutcheon's reading of postmodernism are germane to freak studies, especially when freaks themselves are the subjects of narratives. If, as Jameson claims, the "modernist aesthetic is . . . linked to the conception of a unique self and a private identity, a unique personality and individuality," then the subjects of postmodernity expose the "bourgeois individual subject [as] a thing of the past . . . a myth" ("Postmodernism and Consumer Society" 131). Yet, in modernist texts, freaks symbolize precisely this striking individualism, held in tension with the mass normativity of their viewing public. Linda Hutcheon contends that postmodernism's emphasis on decentering the individual calls into question "both humanist and capitalist notions of selfhood," and that this is yet another aspect of postmodernism's paradoxical legitimation and subversion (13). If modernist texts invoke the freak as a metaphor for the concept of a unique self, it is to reify that concept. One of the motivating questions of this chapter is how the postmodern invocation of the freak as subject should be understood. Is this an ironic fiction that both inscribes and transgresses the boundaries of humanness? Does it rework the concept of the ideal capitalist subject? Or uphold it? For whom is the freak productive? And for whom is it detrimental? These questions serve to brush against utopian readings of the freak show, to think critically about the value of the freak in postmodernity.

Previous chapters of this dissertation have questioned the utility of the freak as metaphor through feminist, queer, and disability studies lenses. The analysis has shown that certain freakish figures mobilize queer worlds and rescript national participation, and that performing one's own freakishness can redefine public space and visualize new relationships to marginalized bodies. This chapter seeks to articulate the "structures of feeling" which inform the postmodern interest in freak shows, and consider the relationship between this narrative form and cultural

production. By considering the relays between historical freak shows, their contemporary counterparts, and their narrative imaginings – particularly with respect to nostalgia for the past – I aim to show that the nostalgic elements of postmodern freak shows, in their performative context and narrative forms, serve as the primary disruption to the genre’s “freaktopic” potential.

Though my focus is postmodernity and the freak show, some rehearsal of critical readings of the freak show in modernist literature will serve as a point of departure. Thomas Fahy’s *Freak Shows and the Modern American Imagination* examines artistic representations of freakishness in American literature, photography and theatre in the early twentieth century, mapping the cultural shift that led to the eventual decline of the freak show as a performance genre (13). Fahy posits that it was during the early twentieth century, when artists and writers still had an opportunity to see freak shows, that the image of the freakish body was “a tool for exploring problematic social attitudes about race, disability and sexual desire in American culture” (13). His study focuses not on literary characters or photographic subjects who are freaks, but on metaphorical freakishness. With the exception of his opening chapter on black pugilists, who were actually exhibited at freak shows with accompanying pitch cards that simulated the fights they would perform onstage (and which he reads against the opening Battle Royale scene in Ellison’s *Invisible Man* to fruitful comparison), and a closing chapter on the stage adaptation of Carson McCuller’s *A Member of the Wedding*, Fahy’s book deals very little with the freak show as a genre, and even less so with figures who are actually working or performing as freaks.

Robin Blyn’s “From Stage to Page: Franz Kafka, Djuna Barnes, and Modernism’s Freak Fictions” argues that the lack of attention to freak shows as genre in literary criticism “divests the freak of his show” (136). T.S. Eliot’s preface to *Nightwood*, she notes, offers an immediate

criticism of any reader who would “miss the point” to merely write off the characters in *Nightwood* as “a horrid sideshow of freaks,” assuming the freak is the symbolic other of high modernism. Leslie Fiedler’s 1978 *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self* devotes eight chapters to cataloging historical freak performers and asserting tenuous connections to the cultural mythologies that informed their presentation and reception, yet when he turns to his literary archive from Shakespeare to Mark Twain, he notes that the “real world of show Freaks is, however, no better captured [in Walter de la Mere’s *Memoirs of a Midget*] than in the other fictions which, from the time of Poe, have turned human prodigies into metaphors for something else” (273). Fiedler himself confirms Blyn’s critique, but also further suggests that even when freaks are characters, such as in de la Mere, they too are mere metaphor. Fiedler’s following chapter, titled “The Silence of Freaks and the Message of the Side Show,” argues that the freak show is “a stock symbol for the interdependence of illusion and reality, pleasure and pain, revulsion and awe” in American popular culture, which is why “artists have attempted to assimilate its meanings to other media” (284).

It is this symbolic function with which Blyn takes issue. A review of criticism on freaks reveals that these studies are limited “to the level of figure or to visual media – the live freak show or its filmic incarnations. By default, the scholarship thus argues that spectacle is not spectacle when it enters the novel; we can narrate a freak show or we can portray a freak in the narrative, but there is no fictional equivalent of the spectacle’s power to display” (136). She goes on to argue that in actual freak shows, the critical tension between narrative and spectacle is nearly collapsed, with performances being framed by narrative spiels from talkers – narratives which are then subsumed and overwritten by the performances themselves. Many actual freak performances consisted of a silent tableau, which both legitimated and silenced the narrative at

once. Kafka and Barnes, she posits, use this interplay of *spiel* and *tableau* to signal “the limits of discourse, the duplicity of the visual, and the crisis and rearticulation of transgressed boundaries” (139). Her analysis suggests that freak show narratives do more than serve as metaphors for pressing cultural issues, as Fahy and Fiedler claim, employing the structural elements of historical freak shows to push narrative and generic boundaries.

The critical readings of freak shows enumerated above focus on their salience in modernist fiction, which raises questions about the prominence of freaks and freak show narratives in postmodernity. If the freak show nearly died out during the mid-twentieth century, why did freaks continue to haunt American literature and culture? What forces within postmodernity brought the freak show back to life? Sometime in the late 1960s, when there were but a few freak shows still in operation, the long-banned film *Freaks* was rediscovered by midnight movie audiences and gained popularity as a cult hit. From there, the underground interest in stories about freaks continued to grow, even as freak performance itself continued to decline. In 1971, anthropologist Ashley Montagu published *The Elephant Man: A Study in Human Dignity*, reintroducing the story of Joseph Carey Merrick (and his bodily pathology) to popular audiences. Interest in Merrick seemed to peak around the publication of Leslie Fiedler’s 1978 book *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self*, with Joan Schenkar’s feminist revision of *The Elephant Man* in *Signs of Life* debuting in 1978, and Bernard Pomerance’s staging of Merrick and Treves’ interactions hitting Broadway just one year later. *The Elephant Man*’s influence spread to Hollywood, and in 1980, when the David Lynch film *The Elephant Man* was released, Merrick’s deformed face once again graced bookshelves on the cover of Howell & Ford’s *The True History of The Elephant Man*. The re-emergence of Tod Browning’s *Freaks* and the story of Joseph Carey Merrick in the pop culture landscape in the late 1960s and 1970s maps

onto the rise of the counterculture movement, and at least in the case of the cult cinema popularity of Browning's film, was ignited by audiences who identified with countercultural ideology.

In "Magical Narratives: On the Dialectical Use of Genre Criticism," Frederic Jameson argues for a dialectical approach to genre criticism, one which considers not simply the relationship between form and content, but also the relationship between what he dubs "substance expression" (ideologemes and narrative paradigms) and the "social and historical raw material" of content (189). He argues that an ideologeme can "project itself variously in the form of a value system or philosophical concept, or in the form of a protonarrative, a private or collective narrative fantasy" (175). Jameson's distinction between substance and content is useful for moving beyond mere structural approaches, redefining content not as "the semantic meaning of the genre mode" but as social and historical raw material. Because of its responsiveness to historical conditions, Jameson's genre analysis tracks deviations in the genre form. Rather than discounting breaks, changes or hybrids as generic failures, Jameson encodes these deviations as signposts to direct "our attention to those determinate changes in the historical situation which block a full manifestation or replication of the structure on the discursive level . . . the failure of a particular generic structure, such as the epic, to reproduce itself not only encourages a search for those substitute textual formations that appear in its wake, but more particularly alerts us to the historical ground, now no longer existent, in which the original structure was meaningful" (188). If genres recur to address significant cultural concerns through a familiar lens, and if these recurrences point to a "historical situation" in which the original structure of the genre, or its permutations, once again becomes meaningful, then the

counterculture's adoption of the freak show as a genre of interest – and “freak” as an ideology – informs the trajectory of the genre's recurrence in postmodernity.

The countercultural interest in freaks transforms the cultural function of the freak show. As the properties of freakishness spill over into the countercultural domain, they become universalized in ways the original performance genre did not anticipate. Leslie Fiedler's analysis of the appropriation of the term “freak” by the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s are germane to this discussion. His archive of counterculture literature does not contain actual freak show performers, but hippies, druggies, musicians, and other non-mainstream archetypes. Quoting from sociologist Daniel Foss's study *Freak Culture*, Fiedler defines these freaks as “visibly members of middle-class youth subcultures which include a subcultural reality in complete discontinuity with the conventional reality. Freaks are walking counter-environments who . . . assert the right to total control over their physical appearance and outward behavior” (303). But Fiedler also proposes that the appellation “freak” in these cases is more nuanced than Foss's study suggests, as “freak” is used both “pejoratively as well as honorifically,” therefore “reflecting confusions in the general culture” (303). In his reading of underground comics featuring musician Frank Zappa, Fiedler suggests that the guitarist's use of the phrase “freak out” as a banner signaling his chosen lifestyle makes one point clear: “if he can do it, anyone can . . . since freakishness is not a fate, a condition to which one is born, as the old-time Freak show seemed to assure us, but a goal, a state which one can attain with the aid of drugs and/or music” (313).

In her introduction to Jim Rose's *Freak Like Me*, Katherine Dunn makes note of the distortion and cooption of sideshow language by the counterculture: “The flower and pot children of the sixties and seventies called themselves freaks, and went on claiming the label

long after they'd reverted to paying taxes and running for the school board" (Rose 12). In Dunn's assessment of the counterculture, to be a freak is to deny participation in middle-class values. And yet, Dunn's comments illustrate that the continued use of the term by so-called freaks who repatriate, so to speak, into normative society, troubles the very definition of freakdom these countercultural figures claim. The notion that one can readily change state from freak to non-freak/norm configures "freak" not just as a social practice (as Bogdan's argues in his genre analysis of the freak show), but an ideological state. What Dunn's sly critique leverages, and what Fiedler fails to acknowledge, is that understanding freakishness is a "state which one can attain" through drugs and/or music is problematic because of the counterculture's key demographic: white, able-bodied, heterosexual men.

Perhaps not surprisingly, those same three descriptors were used by Thomas Naleigh in his talk about the economy of contemporary revival sideshows at the 2015 Pop Culture Association conference. Naleigh, also known as Reverend Tommy Gunn, is a sideshow historian and working blockhead/pain-proof man with Freakshow Deluxe, and like many members of the neo-sideshow revival, he too fits those descriptors. Naleigh's talk championed the business practices of contemporary sideshow, articulating the manner in which sideshows make money and pay their employees, arguing that there is nothing exploitative about neo-sideshow. Perhaps the initial attraction to freak show performance by men like Naleigh and others stems from a countercultural ideology, but contemporary sideshows by no means replicate the power dynamics of sideshows from the Victorian era or the early twentieth century. For one, there are far fewer of what Naleigh refers to as "natural born freaks," citing an overall precedent for "working acts" like Naleigh's own blockhead stint, contortion, fire eating, sword swallowing, etc. Freaks are almost always "made" in neo-sideshow, and are created by their own design.

Whereas the performer's ability to consent in historical sideshows was sometimes coerced or otherwise troubled, everyone who enters a contemporary sideshow does so of their own free will. This shift in the power dynamics between laborers and employers coincides with a noticeable change in the composition of contemporary sideshows; persons of color and persons with disabilities are marginalized. At the center of the genre are white, cisgender able-bodied men (and, to a far lesser extent, white, cisgender able-bodied women).

In her epilogue to *Sideshow U.S.A.*, Rachel Adams writes about the continuation of freak shows or freak show-esque spectacles in the 1990s and early 2000s, paying less attention to the bombastic body manipulation performances of outfits like The Jim Rose Circus Sideshow, and more to historical organizations like Dick Zigun's Coney Island Circus Sideshow or the queer-focused sideshows of the Bindlestiff Family Cirkus. "The fact that freak shows still exist at all attests to their flexibility, a willingness to mutate in response to shifting cultural norms while preserving enough of the original format to remain immediately recognizable," she concludes in opposition to Bogdan and Fahy's assessment of the genre's midcentury decline (211). A demonstrably mutable genre, the freak show she celebrates incorporates substantial "interpretation, citation, and critique" of the historical sideshow relying on performers and showrunners well-versed in history "and conversant in cultural studies and post-structuralist theory" (210). Indeed, the freak shows in Adams' study do bend and manipulate the original genre to allow greater visibility for queer performers, and sometimes too for performing women and persons with disabilities or bodily anomalies. However, it is also important to note that, with the exception of the Bindlestiff Family Cirkus, the majority of contemporary sideshow outfits operate under the management of a white, able-bodied, male showrunner, which reinforces the

problematic power dynamics of the historical freak show, in spite of whatever noble or critical intentions the showrunner may have.

J. Dee Hill's *Freaks & Fire: The Underground Reinvention of the Circus* suggests that the continued countercultural use of "freak" as a self-descriptor "implies both a larger community in which the individual is shunned, or at least regarded with vague suspicions, for his or her peculiarities, and a smaller community, in which those peculiarities are embraced" (xi). Hill's account of the neo-circus and sideshow movement contextualizes its rise alongside music festivals as an appeal to a tribal past, and a deliberate (if temporary) rejection of modernity. "The phenomenon of alternative circus performance can be seen as the theatrical dimension to one generation's wholesale rediscovery of the concept of the tribe" (xii). Hill seems to be referring specifically to the "modern primitives" who form communities around traveling music festivals, artist and maker movements, and others that sprang up in resistance to the corporatized cultural milieu of late capital in the late 1980s. These vestiges of hippie and punk movements, Hill surmises, are interested in "making their own fun, creating their own entertainment rather than consuming it." This "anti-consumer ethic" pervades the modern circus and sideshow movement, she concludes, configuring the contemporary sideshow as locus where performers can be "who they really are – freaks – and uncovering for all the world to see their most mad, strange, divine selves" (xv).

Hill's reading of the neo-sideshow movement's turn toward the tribal past resonates with Raymond Williams's analysis of the dominant, residual, and emergent forms of culture in *Marxism and Literature*. Any dominant cultural process contains both the residual elements of its past, as well as emergent elements that operate as radically different alternatives or oppositions to the dominant culture (124). Residual elements, Williams explains, are "certain experiences,

meanings, and values which cannot be expressed or substantially verified in terms of the dominant culture, [but] are nevertheless lived and practiced on the basis of the residue . . . of some previous social and cultural institution or formation” (122). He further distinguishes residual elements that maintain “an alternative or even oppositional relation to the dominant culture” from those that are fully incorporated into the dominant culture (122). Truly emergent cultural forms engage in a renewable, repeated struggle to “move beyond a phase of practical incorporation” into the dominant culture (124).

The neo-sideshow calls upon the residual aesthetics and practices of pre-modern tribal cultures as an alternative to late capitalism. Yet, the “anti-consumer ethics” Hill documents seem fundamentally out of sorts with the genre itself, which is inextricably tied to modes of capitalist production. Given Williams warning that the dominant culture (late capital) “cannot allow too much residual experience and practice outside itself,” the neo-sideshow is, perhaps, best understood as the dominant culture’s drive to protect itself from losing consumers (123). Indeed, as outlets like The Jim Rose Circus, Freakshow Deluxe, and others tour the country, the shows themselves are incorporated into the structures of capitalist production. Neo-sideshow certainly stages the freak show as cultural residue in opposition to banal normativity, but this antimony is also fraught. To resurrect the sideshow is to call forth a mode of capitalist production that, to quote Terry Eagleton, made strategic use of the otherness of its performing subjects and “promoted it in highly structured ways” (9 as qtd in Harvey). It is difficult to read neo-sideshow’s anti-consumer ethics as subversive given the genre’s ties to capital, but this positioning is even more troubling with regard to the decidedly anti-normative identity politics of the neo-sideshow movement. In the largely white world of neo-sideshow, those closest to the normate position get to ‘play’ at otherness, and capitalize on it.

Neo-sideshow, then, is not a genuinely emergent genre, but a nostalgic longing. It is an intentional culling of cultural residue to reinvent a past that never quite was as an alternative to a present driven by capitalist consumption. In some sense, the neo-sideshow movement replicates the aesthetic practices of the modernist avant-garde with respect to the aesthetics of freakery. The avant-garde aesthetic typically rejects linear forms, subverts established uses of ready-made objects, and makes little distinction between high and low forms of culture. Many now-traditional aspects of freak shows reflect these aesthetics, including the emphasis on bodies of difference, the transformative ways in which disabled performers used everyday objects, and narrative frameworks about scientific inquiry that permeated the “low” genre of freak performance. In *Freak-Garde*, Robin Blyn argues contemporary freak shows are extensions of the avant-garde sensibilities contemporary art:

Like the recently resurrected Coney Island Circus Sideshow, these freak shows were flagrantly low-budget enterprises. They ostensibly eschewed the profit motives of P. T. Barnum’s infamous exhibitions of human curiosities in the nineteenth century. Instead, like Karen Finlay, Ron Athey, and other fetish club avant-gardists, the freak show performers of the 1990s enfreaked their own bodies in order to challenge the institution of art, the instrumentalization and commodification of the body, and the continued reign of white, heteronormative patriarchy. Suddenly, freak shows were the art of dissent du jour. Yet freak shows were not merely the countercultural domain of fetish clubs, rock shows, and street performers. On the contrary, they had become a staple of late twentieth-century popular culture. Throughout the eighties and nineties, for example, freaks were on display in both art house and first-run feature films. I am thinking, in particular, of a trio of films focused on conjoined twins: *A Zed and Two Naughts* (1985), *Dead Ringers*

(1988), and *Twin Falls Idaho* (1999). In graphic novels, in generously illustrated zines, in cable network television series, and in cyberpunk, freaks and freak shows were everywhere. Thus the contemporary freak show renaissance presented itself as a complex affair, raising questions about the viability of any dissident art practice in the context of late capitalism and its voracious culture industry. Does postmodernism allow for the existence of anything like an avant-garde? Does commodification inevitably drain avant-garde art of its revolutionary potential? Given that there is no utopian space beyond the reach of capitalism in the United States, how can an avant-garde that owes its existence to capitalism enable our liberation from it? (xi-x)

Blyn's reading of postmodern freak shows posits some key questions about the validity of countercultural art practices within late capital, pointing to the limits of Hill's reading of neo-circus as an anti-consumer space. Certainly, to revive a capitalist enterprise as an anti-consumer space is challenging, and is itself an act as bound up in contradictions as the "hippie capitalist." Blyn's suggestion that avant-garde artists' participation in contemporary freak shows functions as a challenge to "white, heteronormative patriarchy" seems immediately undercut, however, by the commercial success of showrunners like Jim Rose, and the continued presence of showrunners that are representative of patriarchal capital.

In 1995, at the zenith of The Jim Rose Sideshow's popularity, the cult television series *The X-Files* dedicated one of its "monster of the week" episodes to the denizens of Gibsonton, Florida – an off-season community for sideshow performers and carnival workers. This episode, "Humbug," joined anomalous bodies with fictional gaffs, and "born" freaks with "made" freaks, the latter including Jim Rose and his colleague The Enigma, who starred as the fictional Dr. Blockhead and The Conundrum, respectively. The episode's plot finds Mulder and Scully

investigating the strange deaths of the town's residents, who range from working freaks like The Alligatorman to Gibsonton's resident artist Hepcat Helm. Along the way the paranormal detectives confront myriad genetic anomalies, as well as their own preconceptions of normalcy and ability. Mulder suspects Rose's character, Dr. Blockhead, of murdering the town's residents because of his outsider status. The good people of Gibsonton, it seems, have a professed disdain for "made freaks" like Dr. Blockhead (owning in part to his propensity to disrupt funerals and turn them into shows). "Humbug" very skillfully combines the real and the fake to participate in the cultural tradition of the sideshow as a space in which boundaries are confronted, distorted, and reconfigured through the process of spectatorship. The script takes viewers through the same kind of ideological processes viewers of real life freak shows would have experienced, ultimately asking us to consider Mulder and Scully's white, heterosexual normativity as something altogether freakish, which is solidified in Dr. Blockhead's application of Scully's earlier line about one of the town's freaks to Agent Mulder: "Imagine going through your whole life looking like that."

As a narrative, "Humbug" follows the generic conventions of the freak show, combining *spiel* (dialogue scenes) with *tableau* (cinematic visuals), which are further enhanced by the replication of the cognitive processes of viewing a freak show. But "Humbug" is also striking because the only "freak performances" it shows are those of Jim Rose/Dr. Blockhead and The Enigma/The Conundrum. Other freak performers in the episode (whether real or fake) are shown only in their offstage personas: as wives, husbands, trailer park managers, bellboys, priests, and small town sheriffs. While the emphasis on the non-performing freaks clearly enhances the episode's intentional confusion of norms, the prominent performances of the made freaks also undercut the power of freakishness as a critical tool for the marginalized. Once again, the visible

spectacle shifts away from performing freaks in ways that reduce their legibility. It is the neo-sideshow showman Jim Rose who gets to speak as a voice for the freaks in his final exchange with Agent Scully:

BLOCKHEAD: That's why it's up to the self-made freaks like me and The Conundrum to remind people.

SCULLY: Remind people of what?

BLOCKHEAD: Nature abhors normality. It can't go for long without creating a mutant. Do you know why?

SCULLY: No; why?

BLOCKHEAD: I don't know either. It's a mystery. Some mysteries are never meant to be solved.

Dr. Blockhead's emphasis on naturalizing freakishness is obviously ironic for viewers, as his freakish practices are the result of alleged study with shaman and swamis and other non-Western body-manipulation artists, but for the character this speech is entirely genuine. Dr. Blockhead, who does not, as Mulder notes, possess a doctorate, has essentially appropriated his freakishness as a justification for his own disdain for a future that "looks just like [Mulder]" in which "twenty-first century genetic engineering will not only eliminate the Siamese twins and the alligator-skin people" and will subsequently be "hard-pressed to find a slight overbite, or a not-so-high cheekbone." Both Mulder and Dr. Blockhead, however, are representatively normative: both white, able-bodied, heterosexual men. The distinction between the two, in Dr. Blockhead's purview, is located in the difference between Mulder's dedication to public service as an FBI agent, and Dr. Blockhead's vocation to public performance. To choose to be a freak, Blockhead argues, is to reject the white middle class values represented by the FBI agent: an

implied allegiance to protecting the public, to uphold the law, defend the US government, etc. What Dr. Blockhead does not realize is that by working on “The X-Files,” a rogue department dedicated to government cover-ups and conspiracies, he and Mulder are, in fact, exactly alike: adjacent to the freakish in ways that allow them to claim deviance from the normative.

For both men, the call towards the freakish responds to the very countercultural ideologies that institutions like the freak show create. Thomas Fahy proposes that the freak show’s very existence “placed conformity at the center of middle-class values, equating the deviant body with extreme individualism” (4). At the core of American ideology, the unique, exceptional individual is always in tension with egalitarianism, as Emily Russell explains in *Reading Embodied Citizenship*, and as I have explored through conjoined twins in chapter one (Russell 31). The notion of counterculture itself assumes a project of public formation that reasserts the value of such individualism over conformity to middle-class values – a project readily achieved through drugs and music as Fiedler outlines. The emergence of the “counterculture” at large in the American mid-century is characteristically postmodern, given the emphasis on choice, rejection of dominant values, and a sense of becoming radically unique. Brian McHale characterizes postmodernity as an intellectual shift from “epistemology to ontology” (8). The countercultural emphasis on individuality privileges this ontological shift, marking the counterculture as the resulting product of subjects striving to become. By attributing the aesthetic weirdness, infinite bodily diversity, and radical individuality of the freak show, counterculture movements of the 1960s and 1970s, in their postmodern quest to become something other than middle-class conformists, effectively appropriate a utopic vision of the freak show.

The tagline for Ryan Murphy's *American Horror Story: Freak Show* is "Wir Sind Alle Freaks," a German phrase which clearly signals the show's "freaktopic" intention. "We are all freaks" introduces a narrative that promises to collapse boundaries between the self and other, allowing viewers to see themselves as more like the freakish characters at the heart of Elsa Mars' Cabinet of Curiosities than the outsiders threatening their lives. However, this invitation, combined with the narrative focus on white, heterosexual male characters instead invokes the countercultural appropriation of "freak" as an anti-establishment rebellion. These narratives provide not a "freaktopia," but rather an escape, both temporary and permanent, from "normative" values for non-freakish characters, and an outright rejection of those norms. While this choice is in some ways informed by contemporary notions of social justice, access, and inclusion, in which the "normative" characters act in alliance with their underprivileged "freak" peers, Ryan Murphy's *American Horror Story: Freak Show* troubles its very tagline.

Like many historical novels, freak show narratives often take place, at least in part, in the past. The narrative structure of Katherine Dunn's *Geek Love*, for instance, looks back on the past glory days of the Binewski Carnival Fabulon, tracing the enterprising family's story to its explosive end, while simultaneously telling of the narrator's post-Fabulon life. In a similar vein, *American Horror Story: Freak Show* is set in Jupiter, Florida in 1952, in the last declining years of the sideshow. Jupiter, unlike Gibsonton on *The X-Files*, is not a carny town, but a town outside which the carnival takes root. The 13-episode series is not framed by a narrator in the present looking back at the past through a more omniscient and objective perspective (like Dunn's *Oly* does), but rather immerses itself in the fictional world of the early 1950s, yet only alludes to one real historical event.

In *Postmodernism*, Jameson dubs the features of the cultural products of the period as “schizophrenic,” characterized by a “constant weakening of historicity,” and forged in the “culture of the image or simulacrum” (18). Jameson posits that the popularity of the era’s historical novels and films, which either reimagine fictionalized versions of real events or insert fictional characters into worlds populated by historical figures, translates real events into a simulacrum of the real, and subsequently enables the conditions for a nostalgic gaze at the past. Likewise, the “collapse of the high-modernist ideology of style” fuels this drive for nostalgia because “producers of culture have nowhere to turn but the past: the imitation of dead styles, stored up in the imaginary museum of a now global culture” for inspiration or modes of expression, resulting often in cultural products composed of a pastiche of past styles (18). Postmodern nostalgia rarely looks back at what might be considered high art, and rather remains fascinated by the “landscape of schlock and kitsch, of TV series and *Reader’s Digest* culture, of advertising and motels, of the late show and the grade-B Hollywood film, or so-called paraliterature, with its airport paperback categories of the gothic and the romance, the popular biography, the murder mystery, and popular science fiction or fantasy novel” (2). The fascination with non-artistic, object-oriented, and genre-focused forms of cultural production, laden with schizophrenic expressions of a pastiche of outdated styles, that Jameson articulates as hallmarks of the postmodern, accurately describe neo-sideshow and *American Horror Story: Freak Show*.

In the episode “Bullseye,” dicephalic conjoined twins Bette & Dot Tattler learn of the surgical separation of the Brodie twins. Born in 1951, the craniopagus twins Roger and Rodney were separated at 15 months old in 1952. The Tattler sisters hear of the Brodie brother’s successful separation through the newspaper, read aloud to them over tea with their suitor, Dandy Mott. Both Brodie twins survived the surgery, but Roger Brodie did not regain

consciousness and died 34 days later. The sisters also learn of Roger's fate via the inclusion of a second newspaper story. "Roger Lee Brodie, the larger of the conjoined twins separated by a surgery most hail as a medical miracle, has died," Dot reads aloud while the camera shows a close up on the same text in the newspaper. The historical fact of the Brodie twins separation and Roger's later death is collapsed within the context of the episode, reducing 34 days to a matter of roughly 5 minutes between the scene where the sisters learn of the surgery and the next scene in which the Brodie twins are discussed. It is not clear to the viewer whether 34 days have passed, as this length of time is not noted in the newspaper or in the conversations surrounding the Brodie twins. Because *AHS: Freak Show* juggles multiple plotlines to cover the breath of major characters, the short span of time between the initial discussion of the separation surgery, and the revelation of Roger Brodie's death does not seem jarring. However, the inclusion of the Brodie twins is the one moment in the entire narrative arc of *American Horror Story: Freak Show* that calls attention to an actual event, and so the collapse of the real-life Brodie brothers' timeline with the series' own temporally compressed narrative fractures the historical event. This fracturing substitutes the real timeline with the representative one, modifying the past into a mere simulacrum with a tenuous connection to the history it presents (Jameson 18).

It is through this imagined past that *AHS: Freak Show* crafts its "freaktopia," positioning Elsa Mars' Cabinet of Curiosities as a refuge from the middle-class world of Jupiter, Florida. Even amongst its ensemble of characters, the show's primary storylines are organized around Elsa Mars, the showrunner, and Jimmy Darling, the young, handsome protagonist whose greatest desire is leave the freak show behind and live among the norms. "If they just got to know us," he reasons, "they would see were just like them." Jimmy makes a habit of sneaking off carnival grounds to visit a local diner, covering his syndactylic hands with black leather mittens in order

to “pass” as normal. As a sandy-haired young white man, Jimmy is the *AHS: Freak Show* character who, were it not for his lobster claw-like hands, appears closest to the normate position. Yet, even when he visits the local diner in his normate guy disguise, the show continues to visually separate Jimmy from everyone else. His outsider position is solidified through his attire: black jeans, white t-shirt, leather jacket, leather cap, and motorcycle boots. As the images below illustrate (*figs. 3 and 4*), the outfit is a clear homage to Marlon Brando’s Johnny Strabler in *The Wild Ones*:



*Figure 3 (left). Marlon Brando as Johnny Strabler in The Wild Ones. Figure 4 (right). Evan Peters as Jimmy Darling on American Horror Story: Freak Show.*

Jimmy’s Brando drag is notable for two reasons. 1) The sartorial choices emphasize Jimmy as anti-normate, even though the character is ostensibly choosing to dress this way to appear more like a norm. The outfit clearly evokes the counterculture – albeit a counterculture of greasers and motorcycle gangs that differs from the counterculture movement of the Zappa-era and beyond. By putting Jimmy in Brando drag, *AHS: Freak Show* constructs resistance to the normative in the most passably normative package. At once, Jimmy resists and critiques the normative, while simultaneously upholding it. 2) *The Wild Ones* was released in 1953, so we are either to believe

that Jimmy Darling inspired *The Wild Ones*' Johnny Stabler, or this sartorial pastiche is yet another instance of the weakening of historicity in postmodernity.

Jimmy's counterculture drag is also ironic in the sense that it engenders his participation in culture beyond the sideshow. By allowing him to pass as a norm, Jimmy's drag allows him to become a *consumer*. Outside of the carnival grounds, dressed like Marlon Brando, he participates in the larger economy of Jupiter, purchasing and consuming diner food, newspapers, and more. Where the labor of the freak is to produce and be consumed, Jimmy's trips to the diner focus instead on his leisure time – a space in which he can consume. That he does this while dressed in the garb of a counterculture icon is ironic, given the counterculture's anti-consumer values. However, the dress is also necessary to be seen as a valid consumer, rather than a commodity – a freak.

Jimmy tries to leverage his passing privilege to help his friends from the sideshow integrate into the norm world. In the second episode of the series, "Massacres and Matinees," he brings his companions along with him to lunch at the diner. But this field trip into town does not have the results that Jimmy had hoped for. As his crew of visibly disabled compatriots walks into the diner, they are immediately met with stares not only by the staff, but by the customers. One woman even asks if the freaks could "eat elsewhere" because their very presence within a public space is disturbing her daughter. Jimmy's ability to pass as a norm puts him in a de facto leadership position. He encourages his companions to use their good table manners, and to be polite.

As the scene plays out, the freaks comply with Jimmy's suggestions to act as normal as possible. Orders are placed. Legless Suzi, the half-woman, jokes that she'll have the wedge salad because she's "watching [her] figure." Everyone follows the rules until Paul the Illustrated Seal

(played by Mat Fraser) insists on eating food that has been left behind by another customer, reaching across the counter with his whole body to take the abandoned plate, shoveling pancakes and bacon into his mouth with his flippers rather than a knife and fork. Paul's breach of politeness spurs microcephalic Pepper to continuously repeat her order and bang her utensils on the counter in an homage to the wedding banquet sequence in *Freaks*, replacing the chant of "Gooble Gobble" with "Meatloaf." This violation of appropriate public behavior, combined with Paul slapping a waitress's hand as she tries to remove his plate, gets the carnival members kicked out of the diner, and ordered never to return.

The diner scene points to the norm world's failures to include the freaks, to be sure, but also illustrates that these failures of inclusion are not simply about appearance, but about labor and consumption. Fundamentally, the disastrous trip to the diner is a scene of consumption. Freaks and norms alike consume both the service of the diner staff and the commercially-prepared food they provide. The diner is a public space that should, theoretically, be equalizing – a commercial space that allows consumers to be in public, while simultaneously enjoying a private meal within that public space. There is an unspoken assumption that separate groups of patrons do not interact with or dine with each other, acting as private individuals within a public space. The diner patrons, scattered throughout the room in booths or on lonely ends of the counter, consume their meals in the illusion of privacy, which the intrusion of the freaks reveals as a fiction. The freaks are a public commodity, meant to be consumed within the context of the show. They are not understood as a public that has equal access to consumption, nor are they assumed to be a part of *the* public. By entering into the diner, they expose the limitations thereof which "invisibly order the political world" (Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics" 77).

For the freaks to be seen as consumers is to reverse the anti-consumer ethics of the postmodern freak show. Earlier in the episode, the show's cast dines together at a community table under the kitchen tent. Everyone one eats out of community plates and drinks from the same "loving cup," much like the wedding banquet scene in *Freaks* to which the episode later alludes. Food at the carnival is not a private experience, but a public one. Presumably, everyone had a hand in preparing either the meal or in setting the table, and so the meal itself is community property, as well as a communal experience. When Paul removes the leftover food from the plate of a patron who's left the diner, he mistakes *private* property for *public* property. The waitress insists several times to Paul that the food he has chosen to eat belongs to someone else, to which he responds it's something perfectly good that has been left behind. This presents two problems for the diner: first, a public health concern should the previous patron's germs infect the secondary consumer (ironic, given that the second consumer in this case is someone the Cold Spring Harbor report would deem as having "defective germ plasm"); second, the loss of funds as Paul doesn't place an order in addition to claiming the leftovers. Much like the carnival itself, the expected exchange for the use of a public space that sells commodities is a minimum purchase. Dollars are exchanged for show tickets and midway games at the carnival, and at the diner, they are exchanged for food and the ability to take up space in public. Paul's attempt to take food that has been left behind piggy-back's on someone else's dollar-for-food exchange, equivalent to sneaking into the tent at the carnival; it disrupts the one-to-one exchange of dollars for goods, and it cannot be tolerated.

Within the carnival grounds, the freaks and the norms that assist in the day to day operations of the show work together to sustain the operations of their community. It is an economy in which labor is rewarded with food and shelter – a self-sustaining space with very

little need to purchase consumer goods from outside the carnival grounds. By virtue of its self-sustaining internal economy, the freak show seemingly resists capitalism. J. Dee Hill identifies this maker-movement ethos as a part of the anti-consumerist ethics of the postmodern circus, yet it is an ethos that remains clear tension with the freak show's actual function as a capitalist enterprise. Painting the freaks of *American Horror Story: Freak Show* as failed consumers who thrive in the sustainable economy of the freak show perpetuates the anti-consumer mythos of the modern freak show, suggesting that the shared labor structure of the carnival grounds is a utopian form. Through this seemingly egalitarian labor model, the freaks form their own accessible public.

Made up of a population of itinerant outcasts, *AHS: Freak Show* posits the freak show as a new modality of kinship that simultaneously critiques the heteronormative, nuclear, middle-class family as the dominant social unit, while upholding it as a utopian form. In Kath Weston's words, the freak show is one of "the families we choose". Mired as the series is in the early 1950s, contemporary viewers are meant to call to mind images of happy, nuclear television families like *Father Knows Best*, *I Love Lucy*, or other popular family sitcoms of the era when we think back on that period of time. The show launches immanent critiques of nuclear family structures, as each one introduced in the narrative is effectively broken in some way: conjoined twins Dot and Bette murder their own mother, Gloria Mott blames her son Dandy's aberrance on his father, and Jimmy Darling's father, strongman Del Toledo, has been absent for the majority of his son's life.

Penny, a candy stripper who finds her way to the carnival, offers the show's most pointed critique of the nuclear family. Her mother is noticeably absent from the narrative, and any time she shares the screen with her father entails a fight about her place in the family. Notably, her

father does not particularly care for her budding romance with Paul the Illustrated Seal. When she walks out of her family home to be with Paul at the end of “Bullseye,” she declares, “I’m gonna have a life that means something, a life with some excitement, not some middle class hell!” This retort serves as her counterpoint to her father’s insistence that she obey his rules while under his roof (i.e. not seeing Paul), but it also posits Paul and his freak show colleagues as deliberately rejecting middle-class values. As she prepares to walk out for a second, final time in “Test of Strength,” she tells her father he’s “too vain to picture a world without a piece of [himself] in it,” indicating that her father only cares about her because of the genetic connection between the two of them. Penny insinuates that her father cares less about her than he does about the continuation of his family line. She frames herself in his terms as a “picture,” a mere copy of an original, and suggests that her real value and potential lie outside the structure of her “middle-class hell.” Penny’s father issues a threat: “If you do something to shame me, shame this family, I’ll make sure it’s known that you’re not a part of it.” And indeed he does, drugging his daughter and forcibly tattooing her face. Though he can never sever their genetic ties, he physically alters his daughter’s appearance to efface any visible similarity between them. Penny must grapple with her new face, and sheds some tears for the loss of her normative beauty. (Penny is played by Grace Gummer, daughter to Meryl Streep.) But in Penny’s rejection of her middle-class life, and in her father’s subsequent rejection of her, she actually *becomes* a freak. Though her initial rejection of her family through her choice of romantic partner may simply be read as defiance, the violence of Penny’s effacement ultimately reconfigures her choice. No longer is she operating in alliance with the carnival freaks; she is one of them. With all options for a normative social life removed by the extremity of her tattoos, Elsa Mars’ Cabinet of Curiosities emerges as a “freaktopia,” an authentic refuge through which she can participate in a world whose denizens

looks and actions set them apart from the dominant world her father represents. In short, her narrative trajectory suggests that the freak show can be a space through which norms and freaks can come together – but only through the rejection (whether forced or chosen) of representative normativity.

Penny, with her newly tattooed face, is quickly welcomed into the “chosen family” of the freak show. Showrunner Elsa Mars is keen to assert herself as the matriarch of this ersatz group, insisting to anyone who dares to take away one of her “monsters” that “we are a troupe of entertainers, a family, and you will not split up our family” (“Monsters Among Us”). Elsa’s sideshow matriarchy is intended to operate differently from both the dominant middle-class culture of Jupiter, Florida and from the historical sideshow itself. In choosing a female showrunner, *AHS: Freak Show* ostensibly disrupts the heterocapitalist patriarchy of both the historical and contemporary sideshow. Elsa routinely dotes on Ma Petite, the carnival’s small woman, as if she were a child, and refers to her second-in-command, Ethel Darling the Bearded Lady, as a sibling. “I had to create a family; they’re all my babies. Every one. I loved them all. But you, you were the sister I never met,” she confesses to Ethel at the end of “Bullseye.” But despite her claims to running her freak show like a family, with the exception of Ma Petite and Ethel, her employees are often treated as disposable commodities. Conjoined twins Bette & Dot Tattler are brought in to save the show from financial ruin, and later sold to Dandy Mott when it becomes clear that their popularity is a threat to Elsa’s own stardom. Her love affair with Paul the Illustrated Seal turns sour because of his relationship with Penny, and Elsa nearly kills him for it, turning him into the target in her knife-throwing act. She is also very keen to sell her freak show – and her family – to the highest bidder the moment she is offered a chance at conventional Hollywood stardom, offloading the show on traveling salesman/magician Chester Creb for

\$1,000 and then to affluent serial killer Dandy Mott for \$10,000 within the space of two episodes.

Elsa's dual role as materfamilias and capitalist showrunner is part and parcel of postmodernity's – and the freak show's – characteristic doubleness. Even in creating utopian alternatives to biological familial structures, the freak show, as a genre form, reconfigures show business as a *family business*. Elsa's "babies" are fundamentally her employees – meaning that the freak show is a space in which work never actually ceases. Though the work of freak performance is limited to the duration of the show itself, the carnival workers all share in the preparation of daily meals, show prep, cleanup, and other daily operations of the Cabinet of Curiosities. There is a somewhat egalitarian quality in the shared labor of the carnival, akin to the shared community models of the kibbutz or commune. However utopian this sharing may be, the fact remains that labor never ceases. Where the domestic home space becomes the refuge from labor for norm families (at least for patriarchs), there is no such retreat from carnival labor. Showrunner Elsa Mars, however, does not participate in these activities; her non-performance jobs involve scouting talent and keeping the books – two tasks that effectively take her outside carnival grounds on a routine basis. As head of the family, a female version of a capitalist patriarch, Elsa's role in the carnival is clearly defined as the work of an employer, not an employee, and affords her different privileges than the rest of the freaks.

The economic dynamics of the freak show as family business resonate with Jameson's reading of *The Godfather* in "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture." Like the freak show, the Mafia is also a "family business." Both structures leverage the "economic realities of late capitalism," but also seem utopic in the way they unify disparate outsiders into an ersatz family unit. While certainly there are genetically-related characters in both *The Godfather* and *AHS*:

*Freak Show*, the notion of “joining the family” is likewise available to those without genetic (or legal) ties. Jameson argues that in *The Godfather*, “the ethnic group can seem to project an image of social reintegration by way of the patriarchal and authoritarian family of the past.” In the Mafia family, security, authority, and familial bonds offer “a Utopian fantasy which can no longer express itself through outmoded paradigms and stereotypes as the image of the now extinct American small town” (147). So, too, does the freak show offer a similar fantasy of social reintegration, though it does so by manipulating the rhetoric of diversity in order to mask its underlying patriarchal and authoritarian structures as embodied in showrunner figures. Mafia narratives reify the “family business” structure as a utopian form, which stands in ironic tension with the amount of intra-familial violence that occurs in the name of security. In her willingness to wound her ex-lover and kill her “sister” Ethel, Elsa Mars is perhaps more like a Mafia Don than she is a matriarch.

Nonetheless, the structure of the freak show is upheld in *AHS* as an alternative to the monstrosity of the norm world – especially by Elsa. In the freak show’s numerous encounters with the Jupiter Police Department, Elsa is quick to remind the lawmen that her family members/employees should not be judged as wrongdoers simply because of their physical differences:

“I’ll tell you who the monsters are! The people outside this tent! In your town, in all these little towns. Housewives pinched with bitterness, stupefied with boredom as they doze off in front of their laundry detergent commercials, and dream of strange, erotic pleasures. They have no souls. My monsters, the ones you call depraved, they are the beautiful, heroic ones. They offer their oddity to the world. They provide a laugh, or a fright, to people in need of entertainment. Everyone is living the life they choose. But you

undoubtedly will be one of those soulless monsters. Perhaps you already are.” (“Monsters Among Us”)

Elsa’s ire toward the bored housewives of Jupiter, dreaming of strange, erotic pleasures, constructs normativity as a stifling choice, and, in fact, no choice at all. In her show, everyone is “living the life they choose;” to embrace normative, middle-class values and practices is to be compelled. Normativity is monstrous, and freakdom, its constitutive opposite, is a valid and valuable option. Elsa’s reading of normativity is certainly in concert with Penny’s critique of the middle-class family, but the former’s framing of freakery as a choice is somewhat dissonant. Like Penny, Elsa makes the transition from norm to freak after losing her legs in an accident while making a pornographic film back in her native Germany. But Elsa’s prosthetics, like Jimmy’s black leather mittens, allow her to comfortably pass as a norm – something Penny’s extensive facial tattoos do not. Elsa’s close-to-normate position allows her to slide easily from one world to the other, demonstrating that “freak” is a decision for a privileged few, and a social construction foisted upon others.

Elsa ultimately leaves the freak show behind to become a television star, selling the show and leaving town before the freak family can avenge Ethel’s death. In selling the freak show, Elsa’s “chooses” business over family, an action which undercuts her embrace of monsters as her “children.” Continuing sales further remove the freak show from the hands of the freaks themselves, with each subsequent owner moving closer and closer to the normate position. After seeing his spotless financial recordkeeping, Elsa brings Chester Creb, a WWII veteran-turned-amateur magician, on to the show as an opening act and bookkeeper, and shortly thereafter sells the show to him for the sum of \$1,000. Chester is an odd man out: a traveling salesman who pushes a product nobody wants, with no family and no home, selling baby chameleons at

carnivals in small towns around the country. He is white and polite almost to a fault, but came back from Normandy Beach irrevocably changed. “I got a metal plate in my head,” he announces when he first meets the freaks, “so I never go out in a thunderstorm.” In addition to the metal plate, Chester hears “bees” in his head and, more disturbingly, the voice of his ventriloquist’s dummy (Marjorie) urging him to do things. When he joins up with the carnival, he feels he has found “a place, a purpose, a family” (“Magical Thinking”).

For Chester, the freak show is attractive not only as a venue to practice his magic tricks and perform ventriloquism with his “best friend” Marjorie, but as an opportunity to reclaim his normate status. He is smitten with the Tattler twins, who are equally smitten with him, seeking a nice man to whom they can lose their virginity, but each time they flirt with him, he flashes back to the last time he was in a relationship with two women. When Chester returned home from WWII with that metal plate in his head, he found his wife had fallen in love with another woman. In the flashbacks, the camera lingers on fractured images of Lucy Creb and her girlfriend Alice in bed together. It then pans to Chester, sitting half in darkness in his easy chair, watching the women. His face is expressionless, as is the face of his dummy, Marjorie, who sits on his lap. He is still wearing his Army uniform. Lucy begs Chester to join the women, but he refuses. In a later scene, Alice taunts him for still wearing his uniform around town, four years after war’s end, and about the kinds of sexual acts she will perform on his wife that he can’t join in on. (To add insult to injury, Alice also implies that Chester cannot get an erection, so he couldn’t join in even if he wanted to.) Bette and Dot’s flirtations are much more welcoming to Chester, though the idea of fulfilling the male fantasy of “being with two women at once” is still somehow repulsive to him. After he consummates his sexual relationship with the Tattler twins, he justifies these actions in

an imaginary conversation with Marjorie, the dummy, insisting that this time it would be different. “They want me to join them,” he says. “They included me.”

The Cabinet of Curiosities is clearly defined for Chester as a space of radical inclusion through his incorporation into the show and his romantic relationship with Bette and Dot. In this freaktopia, he is able to fully participate in all aspects of normative economic and sexual production. No longer threatened by his wife’s lesbian relationship, Chester is able to have heterosexual sex with the twins, and do so without his dummy looking on. In his imagination, however, Marjorie protests this arrangement, arguing that it isn’t fair for her to be excluded. Upon hearing this, Chester flashes back once again to Lucy and Alice in bed, this time with Marjorie – now played by actress Jamie Brewer<sup>16</sup> instead of a wooden doll – straddling the women and bludgeoning them to death with a hammer. “They should have let us join in,” Marjorie shouts. “We should have been included.”

The murder scene is later replayed with Chester, still in his service uniform, in the role of the deadly doll – confirmation that Marjorie’s voice and actions are a manifestation of the magician’s disassociation from his violent actions, coded both as the murder and his participation in the war itself. Though Chester Creb is ultimately a minor character (played by major guest star Neil Patrick Harris), his story is very telling with regard to the limits of the freaktopia. The continued presence of his Army uniform, along with his inability to rejoin his wife’s bed, suggest that Chester’s biggest issue isn’t simply his mental illness, but his failure to reintegrate into civilian life. The traumatic brain injury he suffered during the war is certainly a part of this, but

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<sup>16</sup> Jamie Brewer, who has had major roles on previous seasons of *American Horror Story*, is an actress with Down’s Syndrome. For a show much hailed for its inclusive casting practices, placing Brewer in this role is problematic at best. To cast an actor with an intellectual disability as a literal “dummy” strikes me as tasteless, and pushes against the show’s professed intentions. It reduces Brewer to something less than human, a scapegoat for a white man’s own guilt and homophobia – a far cry from the telekinetic witch she played on the previous season.

the desire for inclusion in normative social structures that are no longer available to him looms larger. To Chester, the freak show is a funhouse mirror version of the world he should have been able to return to after the war. It is a space in which he can be an individual (even if he isn't a freak), and yet feel he is part of a greater whole. The freak show's liberal pluralist imagining becomes a beacon of hope for the veteran-turned-magician, and his expression upon seeing Dot and Bette for the first time might read a little like the anticipatory illumination of *vor-scheinn*.

Although Chester assumes that his relationship with Bette and Dot is “gonna cure me of everything that's wrong with me,” it in fact does the opposite. The twins' double body calls up flashbacks to the gruesome murder of his wife and her lover, and sometimes Chester imagines Alice and Lucy's heads on Bette and Dot's body. The cinematic style of the Chester episodes pulse in and out of the real present, Chester's imagined futures as a star magician, and his murderous past. The stylistic schizophrenia and temporal confusion certainly heighten Chester's own schizophrenic existence, but also emphasize the questions about subjectivity, becoming and belonging at the core of Chester's storyline. After he imagines his wife and her lover on Bette and Dot's conjoined body, Chester can no longer separate the identities of his current paramours from the lesbian lovers he murdered. He decides he must separate the twins, turning his desire for inclusion and social reintegration into a drive toward clear subjecthood. That two things – specifically two women – could be blended together is intolerable to Chester, both recalling and subverting some of the themes in Shelley Jackson's *Half-Life*. Homosexuality is a threat to his own masculinity, and the dual subjectivity of the Tattler twins likewise threatens Chester's own split subjectivity as manifested in his dummy, Marjorie.

Once Chester takes ownership of the Cabinet of Curiosities, he leverages this position to promote himself as an exceptional individual, moving his opening magic act to the show's grand

finale. He decides to perform a variation of the classic “magic saw” trick on the Tattler twins, effectively granting the sisters the separation surgery they had mulled over when reading about the Brodie twins in “Bullseye.” The sisters, having learned of Chester’s murderous past, refuse and the magician is forced to perform the act on another volunteer, to disastrous results. By placing handcuffs around the girl’s ankles, he prevents her from drawing her body up into the top half of the box, actually sawing her in two as he runs the blade through her middle. The freaks watch in horror as the girl’s innards spill out onto the stage when the box is split in half, and Chester, in a state of shock, insists that he can magically put her back together. Chester’s final scene on *American Horror Story* shows the blood-covered salesman walking into the Jupiter Police station with a bundle in his arms, confessing that he has murdered a girl. He sets the bundle down on an officer’s desk and kneels down in the middle of the room with his hands in the air. “I did it,” he cries, as the police officer pulls away the blankets to reveal Marjorie, the ventriloquist’s dummy, covered in blood.

With the “death” of Marjorie, Chester Creb’s narrative resolves only his drive toward subjective unity. The freak show, with its funhouse mirror versions of the real world, cannot include him, and his decision to turn himself in to the police reflects a recognition of this fact on some level. Chester’s polite exterior belies the threat of homophobia and misogyny, both of which have no place in the freaktopia, and thus the space cannot actually “cure” Chester of everything wrong with him. Though he enters the freak show as a person with little relative status and position, drawn in by the promises of inclusion and exceptionalism, his narrative actually restores Chester’s normativity. As Chester gains back status and power by pursuing a heterosexual relationship and purchasing the freak show, these things drive his mental illness to a breaking point. Chester’s decision to leave the freak show at the end of “Show Stoppers” and

turn himself in to the police is significant; it suggests that there are certain conditions for participation in the freaktopia, and mental illnesses like Chester's disassociation and schizophrenia are hard limits. He is not, however, rejected by the freaks. His ejection from the Cabinet of Curiosities is of his own volition, motivated by the desire to seek redemption for his crimes. By turning himself in to the police, however, Chester seems to return to normative structures of public life. His status as a disabled veteran, which may also pose some limits on his participation in the freaktopia<sup>17</sup>, marks him as not just a member of the public, but a representative of America itself. When he turns himself in, he turns back to the government to incorporate him into public life – even though this action implies the ironic outcome of incarceration for Chester, either in prison or a mental institution. This is nonetheless a legitimizing move for Chester, leaving behind the countercultural freaktopia to return to the normative structures of public life and the justice system.

But without a showrunner, the freak show cannot function, and so Elsa Mars makes an eleventh hour deal with Dandy Mott to buy her show for \$10,000. Dandy is not only the most normate of the Cabinet of Curiosities' three showrunners as a white, heterosexual, able-bodied man, but is also an old-money capitalist with a penchant for homicide. In the second episode of the series, "Massacres and Matinees," Dandy Mott and his mother buy out the freak show's afternoon show for a private performance. Disappointed with the show itself, but greatly enamored of the Tattler twins, Dandy later makes a deal with Elsa to buy the conjoined sisters to be his personal paramours. His business-related deals with the freak show, eventually leading to

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<sup>17</sup> No disabled veterans were ever presented as freaks in the entire history of the freak show. However, one disabled vet, Howard Bone, did become a sideshow magician. His memoir, *Side Show: My Life with Geeks, Freaks & Vagabonds in the Carny Trade*, attests that Bone joined up with a carnival during WWII, knowing "it would be looking for help because World War II was underway and most able-bodied men were in the armed forces. I had been a soldier myself," he confesses, "but had received a disability discharge. I had to show it once, too, when an FBI agent stopped to ask why I wasn't in uniform" (19).

his ownership thereof, bespeak Dandy's considerable financial resources, as well as his acquisitiveness. Because capital is expendable to him, so, too, are the things it can buy. Among these things are: the serial killer clown he slaughters and impersonates, sex workers, the family maid, and the freak show itself. That all of the showrunners at the freak show are murderers of varying degrees is itself an argument against capitalism, bluntly pointing out how vulnerable bodies become under a system with high demands on the laboring capacity of the body itself. That the final owner of the Cabinet of Curiosities is a bored, rich, serial murderer perhaps oversells this point.

For Dandy Mott, the freak show is the ultimate acquisition. Living off his family's inherited fortune with no job prospects to speak of (and no need for any), Dandy is a pure consumer. That his name is Dandy bespeaks his overly neat and fashionable appearance, while also linking him to the kind of well-to-do nineteenth century men who devoted their lives to cultivating and maintaining such fashions. Nineteenth century dandies, like Mr. Mott, were also pure consumers, whose primary social motivations were the acquisition of beautiful objects. Dandy approaches the freak show with a consumer's eye, delighted by novelty that will quench his boredom, and is keen to marry Bette & Dot for that reason. (His delight in novelty likewise is satisfied by finding new victims and new ways to slaughter them.) He is not interested in the freak show as a family, or in viewing the freaks as similar to himself in any way. *AHS: Freak Show* likens Dandy's drive for consumption to that of a child, literalized in a shot of the character suckling liquor from a crystal baby bottle during dinner. Like an overgrown child, Dandy spends most of his free time inside a pristine room at Mott Manor referred to as his playroom. It is strewn with charmingly odd commodities, including oversized stuffed animals, a miniature golf strip, rocking horses, and a small stage for puppet shows (which later becomes the alter for his

wedding to Bette & Dot). The playroom is a space of pure entertainment and novelty, and suggests that Dandy's overabundance of leisure time is, in a sense, regressive and atavistic. His appearance and his proclivities for reckless overconsumption paint Dandy as a man out of time and out of place with the largely middle-class surroundings of Jupiter and the laboring space of the freak show. As man who consumes far more than he produces, then, he is most certainly a threat to both the economic and social lives of the freaks and their show.

Dandy's overconsumption of commodities serves as a counterpoint to the way the freaks negotiate their consumption in the diner scene I previously discussed. Both of these modes of consumption seem transgressive, but the narrative elicits pathos on behalf of the freaks, and disgust (and laughter) at Dandy. His extreme consumption and expenditure is both a throwback to an earlier era of capitalism, and a critique of late capital itself. *AHS: Freak Show* makes this most clear in Dandy's monologue in "Pink Cupcakes," during which he ritualistically prepares himself for his day, a la Patrick Bateman in Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*.

The scene is filmed and narrated similarly to Bateman's morning ritual scene in the film version, and echoes the frenetic pace of the chapter in Ellis's novel called "Morning," which is a single paragraph that spans six pages and details everything Bateman does to his body every morning before work. The scenes focus on these wealthy men's slavish devotion to their appearances, whether it be Dandy's love of abdominal oil and Charles Atlas tapes or Bateman's for Ralph Lauren boxers and Clinique moisturizer (Ellis 26). Their affluence, too, links Mott and Bateman. They are both spoiled, rich, white men, who are perhaps bored with everything their money has enabled them, and purported to be fundamentally "American" in their character. Indeed, Ellis's novel asserts Bateman's typicality by titling the book *American Psycho*. In doing so, Patrick Bateman, affluent serial killer, becomes a national type, a "shadow of the American

self-image of independence” as Phillip L. Simpson writes in “Wither the Serial Killer Movie?”. Likewise, Dandy Mott claims his body as fundamentally American. As he performs planks and pushups in his underwear, his voiceover intones, “This body is America. Strong. Violent. Full of limitless potential . . . I am no clown . . . I will be the U.S. Steel of murder.” Dandy, like Bateman, is configured as a national type. Bateman’s continual application of brand name products to his body, the constant name dropping of commodities throughout the text, especially in terms of what Bateman is wearing, aligns the man himself with capital, and capital with violence. Likewise, Dandy’s body is not only “America,” but a particular iteration of the American corporation. It is not enough to be a national type; he must be a *brand*: the U.S. Steel of murder.

The association of Dandy’s own morning ritual with Patrick Bateman’s in *American Psycho* creates a textual alignment between *American Horror Story* as a television property, and both Ellis’s novel and Gwen Turner and Mary Haron’s cinematic adaptation of it. The homage to Turner and Haron’s film is clear in the style of the narration and the cinematography of Dandy’s monologue, reflecting a characteristically postmodern turn toward cannibalizing previously iterated styles. However, this is a case of a postmodern text reiterating and referencing another postmodern text, suggesting perhaps that postmodernity has begun to cannibalize its own cultural commodities in ways that are both destructive and generative. That *American Horror Story* has consumed *American Psycho* – and that it has done so through a character that fundamentally overconsumes and therefore destroys – is both laudatory of its own network of references, but also critical of its own ouroboric form. While the rehashing of cultural references is generative for *American Horror Story*’s own narrative, it also flattens the show’s potential for uniqueness, which points to the very paradox of Dandy’s corporatized boredom: even with the “limitless

potential” afforded to him by his extreme normalcy, Mott’s narrative reiterates Patrick Bateman’s, played out in the dead style of the dandy.

It should come as no surprise, then, that Dandy’s ownership of the freak show ends bitterly. Like Chester before him (and Elsa before that), he insists on making himself the star of the show, claiming to his employees, “This is my show. I’ll do whatever I want,” in spite of their protestations that no one comes to a freak show to hear a “rich nancy” sing Cole Porter tunes (“Curtain Call”). In response, Paul the Illustrated Seal tells off his new boss: “You think you’re special? Your mum probably told you all your life. Well, I’ve got news for you. You’re not special . . . You don’t own us. You’ll never be one of us. We quit.” Paul’s retort subsumes Dandy’s claim to exceptionalism under the flattening logic of pluralism. But his comment also cuts across this tension, asserting that because Dandy is fundamentally unspecial, he cannot “be one of us,” nor can he own the freaks themselves. Dandy responds to Paul’s castigations by systematically murdering his former employees, stalking through the carnival grounds at mid-day and shooting everyone in sight: Paul, Penny, Legless Suzi, Amazon Eve, and others.

Only the Tattler sisters, three-breasted Desiree Dupree, and Jimmy Darling escape the massacre. The sisters are spared so that they can become Dandy’s brides, while Desiree manages to survive by hiding in her trailer. Jimmy Darling is saved simply because he wasn’t there at the time, returning from his convalescence<sup>18</sup> off carnival grounds hours after the massacre to find the bodies of his friends united in death under the big top, strewn along the aisle leading up to the stage, where Penny’s body is impaled on the microphone stand. Together, the survivors hatch a

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<sup>18</sup> A secondary threat to the Cabinet of Curiosities throughout the series is a con man named Stanley who tries to lure the freaks away from the show in order to kill them and sell their anomalous body parts to the American Morbidity Museum. Jimmy sells his hands in order to get out of jail after being framed for murder, taking him away from the carnival for the latter half of the series.

plot in which Bette voluntarily marries Dandy, therefore allowing the sisters to secret Jimmy and Desiree inside Mott Manor to poison Dandy, and return him to the carnival grounds where they proceed to take their revenge. Dandy, who so wished to assert his exceptionalism as a part of the freak show, finally becomes the show itself when the remaining freaks chain him in what viewers assume to be one of Chester Creb's abandoned magic props: the water-torture escape made famous by Harry Houdini<sup>19</sup>. Stripped to his underwear and unable to escape, a humbled and fearful Dandy begs mercy of the freaks as the water starts to rise. Desiree gloats, "You may look like a motion picture dream boat, but you are the biggest freak of them all." By calling Dandy "the biggest freak of them all," Desiree's inversion of the freak-normate binary configures Dandy's matinee idol appearance as a mask that obscures his lack of ethics and moral bankruptcy. Being a freak performer is one thing, she suggests, but the hyper-normate white capitalist patriarchy is freakdom in extremity. As the water rushes up to Dandy's neck, Jimmy proclaims, "We sentence you and your whole rotten world to death . . . The freaks shall inherit the earth." That both white male showrunners kill because they feel excluded from the "one of us" mentality of the freak show critiques the appropriation of difference by normate culture. That the surviving freaks choose to revolt against this by drowning Dandy Mott argues that the freaktopia fundamentally cannot exist if the normate world intrudes upon it, destroying the ersatz family of the freak show through the extreme violence of capital.

With Dandy Mott dead, Chester Creb (presumably) incarcerated, Elsa Mars off chasing her Hollywood dreams, and only four survivors, *American Horror Story: Freak Show* ends with the collapse of its carnival world. With no show, and no one left to star in it or run it, the pluralist

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<sup>19</sup> *AHS: Freak Show* erroneously attributes this act to "Hardeen Houdini," Harry Houdini's younger brother who also performed escape acts. Hardeen inherited the trick from Houdini, but never performed it.

freaktopia of the Cabinet of Curiosities dries up. The encroachment of the normate world upon the freak show destroys the show's capacity for anticipatory illumination, illustrating that the inclusive, diverse freaktopia is fundamentally incongruous with heteropatriarchal capitalism. The remaining freaks, instead, are incorporated into the norm world as the very consumers they were prevented from being in "Massacres and Matinees." As the Halloween special of *The Elsa Mars Hour* plays on a cluster of television screens in a Jupiter appliance store, a well-dressed black man and two costumed children race by. Behind them strides Desiree Dupree, perfectly dressed in a royal blue suit adorned with fur trim, who stops by the window to take in Elsa's special. Her husband returns to her side, placing his arm around her. "What are you looking at, wife?" he queries. "The television we got at home is just fine." Desiree leans in to his embrace, smiles up at him and replies, "Everything we got at home is just fine." The camera returns its focus on the television screen, and then pans out to Jimmy Darling sitting in an easy chair in his living room, watching the same special. Partially out of view, a woman walks past him and sets a meal on the empty TV tray in front of him. He stands to follow her, placing his prosthetic lobster hands around the woman's back to ease her down to the couch. As she sits, it becomes clear that the female figure is actually Bette and Dot, and that they are pregnant. Jimmy places one hand upon the sisters' swollen belly, and asks, "How are my girls doing?" "Just fine," Dot replies. "All of us," Bette adds, happily picking up a magazine to flip through as her sister kisses Jimmy.

It seems, then, that the surviving freaks do not "inherit the earth" so much as they are reincorporated into the very middle class value structures the series positioned them against. The counterculture of freakdom, then, is reabsorbed by the mainstream culture. As Raymond Williams notes, dominant cultures "cannot allow too much residual experience and practice outside itself, at least without risk" (123). The freaktopia presents far too much risk for the

dominant culture to allow, and *American Horror Story: Freak Show*'s choice to resolve the narrative by incorporating Jimmy, Desiree, and the Tattler sisters into the structural fabric of middle class American life instead reifies the nuclear family as the most utopic form. The freak family is a good substitute, it suggests, but the real thing is "better." That both Desiree's family and the Darling-Tattler household are fundamentally freakish, however, may also suggest that the freaks do inherit the earth by dissolving the boundaries that have previously removed them from these aspects of public life. If the nuclear family is the most ideal form of public participation, it must be accessible to all. The normate fantasy becomes the freak's fantasy, suggesting that "we are all one" in a tract home somewhere in the suburbs.

It is from those tract homes in the suburbs that the survivors of the Cabinet of Curiosities sit on their couches and watch their former showrunner Elsa Mars die on air during her Halloween broadcast. A key myth that drives Elsa's narrative on *AHS* is the superstition that no freak must ever perform on Halloween, lest their soul be claimed by Edward Mordrake, the ghost of a nineteenth century Victorian gentleman who was compelled to commit murders by the visage on the back of his head – the vestiges of an underdeveloped craniopagus twin. Elsa performs for the Halloween special knowing that she will be claimed by the supernatural freak to join his band of itinerant spirits. Mordrake appears to her during her song, and she begs him to take her, saying, "I am the biggest freak of all." As Mordrake stabs her on set, the camera cuts to a television set showing the special, where Elsa appears to fall to the floor having suffered a stroke or a heart attack. Mordrake whispers, "Your place is not with us." The screen fades to black, and then fades up again on the carnival grounds. Carnival music plays over images of the fairgrounds, which Elsa's disoriented face floats above. The camera then switches to a tracking shot, following Elsa through the mouth that marks the entrance to the carnival grounds, and into

the big tent. Once inside, the camera switches to Elsa's point of view, looking down at Ma Petite, who greets her with "Welcome, Miss Elsa." The camera switches from Elsa's point of view to a wide shot showing Elsa embracing her child-friend Ma Petite, and continues to switch from POV to wide as Elsa is met by her former employees: Paul and Penny (who gleefully show her their wedding rings), Legless Suzi, Amazon Eve, and others who lost their lives during the series. Last to greet her is Ethel, who tells Elsa that it's about time she finally arrived as the show has been waiting for its headliner. Elsa, knowing she is in some kind of afterlife, tearfully asks Ethel, "But don't I have to pay for my sins?" Ethel replies, "Can you imagine the police showing up at the Old Globe and arresting the guy playing Othello for murdering Desdemona? And besides, it's like you always said: stars never pay."

Ethel's remark reiterates freak as a social construction, and therefore allows Elsa to reunite with her freak family in her freaktopian afterlife. Like any of the working freaks in her employ, Elsa is a performer playing a role, and thus, by her own logic, does not "pay" for her moral failings. For all of her passing privilege in the normate world, Elsa Mars is allowed to return to the freaktopia because she is "the biggest freak of all." That this line – "the biggest freak of all" – is applied to both Elsa Mars and Dandy Mott is worth some consideration. For Dandy, it is applied to him by Desiree to critique his normativity, but for Elsa, it is an identity that she claims in her hour of need. She spends most of her time presenting as normate, allowing her prosthetics to create a fiction of wholeness so that even her employees don't see her as a disabled woman, and, yet, when the normate world is ready to cast her out, claims that she is "the biggest freak of all" in order to return to the freaktopia she left behind. Elsa's reincorporation into her "family" in the afterlife suggests that she sees the freak show as an ideal public form not because of its diversity or inclusive nature, but because it was where she could maintain and

promote herself as an exceptional individual – a star. Indeed, it seems that on *American Horror Story*, and perhaps in neo-sideshow at large, stars do not pay for their appropriation of pluralist imaginings.

In *Freak Like Me*, Jim Rose expresses his own ambivalence about the freak show renaissance of the 1990s. “On the one hand, I was elated: we’d helped to bring back a part of Americana to a Lost Generation, whose only exposure to sideshows had been through books,” he writes. “On the other hand, I was seeing history repeat itself. People think the sideshow died due to the advent of TV; but that’s not entirely true. They vanished, I think, because so many popped up, they were no longer unique” (164). Though genre historians and cultural critics have largely cited a cultural shift in moral understandings of disability as the death knell for the sideshow, Rose’s analysis offers a reading that is colored both by the anti-consumer ethics of the counterculture, and by capital itself. His sentiments bemoan the loss of uniqueness in an oversaturated market of Jim Rose clones, longing again for the exceptionalism the freak show initially provided. This is also the underlying logic of the economic principle of supply and demand, where surplus ultimately drives down the value of the initial product.

Rose’s fears about the sideshow renaissance recapitulate Blyn’s questions about the validity of the sideshow as an aesthetic tool of the avant-garde. How can a genre created by capital possibly enable its liberation from it? *American Horror Story: Freak Show* suggests that this is only possible when you are the most exceptional star in the freak show, while simultaneously demonstrating that the most exceptional members of the freak family are not actually welcome in the first place. The freak show’s liberatory potential, then, is fraught. While it does, perhaps, seem possible to conceptualize a freaktopia that models how “we are all one under the big top of humanity,” these models are too often reincorporated into the dominant

structures of capital that created them because they are too closely tied to the residue of the original genre. Film historian Steve Neale asserts that the popularity of certain genres in Hollywood is also directly correlated to capital production. Genres are repeated and reproduced by movie studios not because they speak to a particular cultural milieu, Neale notes, but because they make money (224). This, too, appears true of the neo-sideshow revival, but only in part. While the neo-sideshow movement certainly did find its way back to its roots as a capitalist enterprise with shows like the Jim Rose Circus or the Venice Beach Freak Show, the resurgence of freak shows speaks more broadly to a need for alternative models of kinship that do not clearly resemble mainstream culture. In postmodernity, this has manifested as a countercultural appropriation of freaks and freak show culture as a critique of middle-class, acquisitive capital, as well as symbolic identifications for the marginalized.

José Esteban Muñoz has poetically called utopia “a time and a place that is not yet here,” embedded with Bloch’s “principle of hope” (99). The “temporal disorganization” of utopia is a way of thinking about “a moment when the here and now is transcended by a *then* and a *there* that could be and indeed should be” (97). The neo-sideshow movement’s temporal disorganization is decidedly not future-focused; in revisiting and revising the historical sideshow, postmodern sideshow narratives and performances are too mired in nostalgia for the past to transcend to what could be or should be. Muñoz’s utopia resists capitalism, in which hope and the indeterminacy of what should be “stand against capitalism’s ever expanding and exhausting force field of how things ‘are and will be’” (99). Yet, sideshows and freak shows are, even in their current incarnations, mired in capitalist practices, and beholden to thinking about preserving the past, rather than imagining a future. The economic structure of the genre itself is effectively the embodiment of David Harvey’s observation: “Capitalism did not invent ‘the other’ but it

certainly made use of and promoted it in highly structured ways” (104). It seems, then, that the utopic potential of the freak show as a space of ultimate plurality is always in tension with the genre’s preference for exceptionalism, and it is this secondary drive toward extreme individuality that overrides the possibilities for a freaktopia where “we are all one under the big top of humanity.”

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