



FREAK SHOWS & HUMAN ZOOS

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The *Digital Literature Review*

The *Digital Literature Review* is a journal showcasing undergraduate student work in literature and cultural studies. The journal is produced by undergraduate students at Ball State University who are involved in the *Digital Literature Review* immersive learning project. Our goal is to provide a forum where undergraduate students can showcase their research projects and disseminate their valuable contributions to ongoing academic conversations.

The *Digital Literature Review* is published annually in the spring. The deadline for submissions is in early January. We welcome original articles relating to each year's theme. Articles should range from 3000-5000 words; every article is reviewed by undergraduate students on the journal's editorial team. Notification of initial decision is in February. All authors receive constructive feedback concerning submissions.

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Introduction: Freak Shows & Human Zoos

In a discussion of the history of entertainment, freak shows and human zoos occupy a problematic and complex space, full of nuance and contradiction. On the surface, these spectacles might appear to be a fun, lighthearted form of entertainment for patrons and an easy, unique way for the performers to make a living; however, there are much more malignant forces roiling beneath that façade. In the circus tents and cages of the freak show, issues of consent, exploitation, racism, sexism, and ableism come to blows with the forces of capitalism, sensationalism, and societal norms.

Although the classic American freak show is no more, its presence is still felt in the academic, social, and pop culture realms. The term “freak” has often been used to describe an individual who does not fit into mainstream society. During the age of the classic, nineteenth-century freak show, this term was used to describe people who were put on display: people with both physical and mental disabilities, people who developed strange talents, people of different races, or even people who merely appeared or pretended to have these characteristics so that they could perform.

In our study of the historical freak show, we became aware of the stark difference between freaks who were “born” and those who were “made.” “Born” freaks often had disabilities; society’s attitudes towards their bodies made them freaks. However, made freaks were people exhibiting an action or talent that would have been considered freakish from the audience’s viewpoint. This results in two different types of freakification, that of the body and that of actions, further distinguishing the two groups and the manner in which they were perceived and treated. One crucial element that both groups share is that a freak is a social invention. That is, whether a person had a physical difference, such as being born with no arms (a “born” freak), or a person had an invented difference, such as a costume splitting a person’s body into male and female halves (a “made” freak), both groups were socially created as freaks because it was the exhibition of these people as “different” and “other” that made them freaks.

Some people could not give consent to being displayed. For example, there were many exhibits that contained “pinheads,” which were people with microcephaly, a condition in which a person’s head and brain do not fully develop. Because of this partial mental impairment, individuals with microcephaly could not fully consent to being exhibited in a freak show. Also, children were part of this group; because of their age, they had very little control over whether they would join the freak show and be exhibited. Many people from colonized areas, such as Saartjie Baartman, were also tricked into being displayed in the freak show and lacked the financial opportunities to leave. Furthermore, the issue of consent also extends to other areas, such as how socioeconomic status impacted a person’s choice of making a living, which coerced people to join the freak show to survive.

Connected to consent is the issue of the gaze and staring, which are alive and well in today's popular media. Staring is an act that is central to the freak show, an act that sets the object of the stare apart as "other" and makes that person into a form of entertainment for the starrer. Freak shows allowed people to stare at others without social repercussions because staring at "freaks" was considered an acceptable form of entertainment. A key component of the stare is the power dynamic which renders the person being stared at (the "freak") as helpless and vulnerable, while giving the person doing the staring (the audience) the power of not only controlling the gaze but also of controlling what is considered "normal."

Many performers in the the nineteenth-century freak show had fictionalized biographies, which allowed audiences to "look" at their private lives. Biographies were often sold on small cards or handouts outside a performer's stage. The potential audience would have the opportunity to read these "biographies" and determine whether or not they desired to pay to see a performer. However, these "biographies" were often exaggerated to such an extent that they were probably more fiction than reality. This exaggeration was done because the freak show was a world where fascination and exoticism serve as the keys to making a living; thus, the grander the biography, the better off a performer would be financially. In an attempt to capture and maintain the fascination the freak show held, authors over the past century have written works featuring "freaks." These works aim to captivate readers and recreate the feelings that once compelled people to visit freak shows and dime museums again and again. Novels such as *Nights at the Circus* and *Geek Love* depict and glorify the lives of people who performed in freak shows, while plays such *Venus* and *Elephant Man* critique the treatment of these "freaks."

An overwhelming number of modern incarnations of the freak show are ever present on our television screens, taking on the forms of reality TV shows, drag shows, or even telethons that raise money to feed the underprivileged. A subject on one of these programs may have agreed to show themselves off to the world in order to reclaim their freakishness, while others (such as children) may not have been willing to do so—often under their parents' control or forced due to their socioeconomical situation.

In the papers "Gender Performance: From the Freakshow to Modern Drag" by Olivia Germann and "Normal versus Freak: The Issue of Staring in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and Classic American Freak Show" by Nikole Darnell, the journal delves into how theatrical performance has been affected and influenced by the freak show through examining how today's performances have both embraced and rejected some vestiges of freak show performance.

Focusing on those objectified in literature, the journal has two submissions analyzing texts and their characters. "Freaks and Magic: The Freakification of Magical Creatures in *Harry Potter*" by Cassandra Grosh and "Kidnapped Amazonians, Severed Breasts, and Witches: Renaissance Perceptions of the Destructive Nature of the Freakish Female in Spenser's *The Bower of Bliss* and Shakespeare's *Two Noble Kinsmen*" by Laken Brooks both analyze the treatment of characters and the lack of equality many face due to

their differences.

Beyond the words printed on a page, the genre of cinema presents further nuance to the ways that individuals can be freakified through literature. In “Man’s Hatred Has Made Me So’: Freakification and the Shifting Gaze in *The Phantom of the Opera* (1925)” by Kathryn Hampshire, and “A Freak Show in *District 9: The Construction of a Freak Amongst Aliens*” by Jessica Carducci, the authors explore the ways that these two films play into the structures and practices of the freak show.

The issue of displaying human difference is also present in television and media today. Lauren Seitz touches on the freakish display of children in reality television in her paper, “Princesses and Monsters?: An Analysis of the Role of the Freak Show in *Toddlers and Tiaras*.” Additionally, Bryce Longenberger addresses issues of fatness and visual display in the television show *The Big Bang Theory* in his paper, “The Unseen Fat Woman: Fatness, Stigma, and Invisibility in Mrs. Wolowitz from *The Big Bang Theory*.” Finally, Amory Orchard explores the ways in which newspaper articles, reality television, and film have impacted the exploitation of two sets of multiples in her paper, “Beyond Bars: How Print and Visual Media Contributed to the Exploitation of the Dionne Quintuplets and the Gosselin Sextuplets.”

While individuals are largely the focus of freakification, entire ethnic groups have also been historically freakified. Lauren Cross, Lauren Seitz, and Shannon Walter explore the world of indigenous African peoples exhibited at the 1889 Paris World’s Fair in “The First of its Kind: A Cultural History of the Village Nègre.” In “Exhibit or Human: Analysis on the Life of the Aztec Children,” authors Cassandra Grosh, Sarah Keck, and Isabel Vazquez examine the mysterious life and origins of the Aztec Children, Maximo and Bartola.

In “Kinderbrutanstalt and Kindchenschema: The Child Hatchery and the Psychology of Cute,” co-authors Nikole Darnell, Kathryn Hampshire, and Amory Orchard study the complex issues that surface when premature babies are displayed in the self-proclaimed interest of medical discovery and moral duties, but ultimately use showmanship to save these young children. Meanwhile, in “What Am I?” Nineteenth-Century Medical Science, Intersexuality, and Freakification in the Life of Karl Hohmann,” authors Jessica Carducci, Allison Haste, and Bryce Longenberger explore how gender binaries in science come together to explain the difference between sexuality and gender.

Although these examinations of cultural history look specifically at episodes from our past, it is vital to make connections to the present. Freak shows in their strictest sense may have closed their doors, but new windows of freakification have since been opened. It is only through critical discourse about the structures and implications of these practices that we can hope to transcend them; in our third edition of the *Digital Literature Review*, we strive to do just that. In selecting the theme of “Freak Shows and Human Zoos,” we enter this conversation and work to bring awareness to some of the elements of our history and realities of our present that many prefer not to acknowledge. It is our hope that through this edition, we can tell the stories of those whose stories were taken from them, and inspire others to do the same.

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Exhibit or Human?: Analysis on the Life of the Aztec Children

- Cassandra Grosh, Sarah Keck and Isabel Vazquez, Ball State University

INTRODUCTION

Few events in the world have captured the fascination of curious masses as did the exhibition of the Aztec Children. Displayed for their physical difference from Western norms, the two siblings were paraded and showcased in front of eager nineteenth-century audiences for profit. During this century, freak shows were at the height

of their popularity due to the growing need for national identity, and thus the fame of the Aztec Children and their exploitation was no coincidence. The misconceptions about foreign cultures and misunderstanding of microcephaly at the time led to the exhibition of the Aztec Children.

The Aztec Children were first exhibited in 1849 in the state of New York. The exhibition focused firstly on their physical “deformities” and secondly on their cognitive disabilities. These two traits allowed for easy stigmatization as well as the confusion of race with disability. Audiences were encouraged to see the disabilities of these two as characteristics of their “Aztec” race. This stigmatized their entire race as cognitively underdeveloped and portrayed those with the disability as “savages.” The owners of the Aztec Children played up their supposed “Aztec” origins and lost-civilization appeal in order to attract customers and therefore profit from their exploitation. Incredibly, *people believed these stories*. As Nigel Rothfels states, “We know that especially in the early years of their tours many believed the pair could in fact have been representatives of a lost race of Aztecs” (159). In reality, the pair were mestizos. Mestizo refers to people

Abstract

Through researching the lives of the Aztec Children, the exploitation of performers becomes evident. These “children” were adults with a congenital disorder who were purchased and commodified since childhood. Due to the manipulation by their various owners, not even the true history of these two are known. This article delves into the history of these two, the issues surrounding their exhibition, and works at the time shedding further light on their time touring the world.

with both Spanish and Native American blood (“Mestizo”).

The Aztec Children were often displayed on stages throughout North America. They were dressed up in costumes with props that fit the image of “otherness” in the mid-1850s. They were generally dressed in clothing that conformed to the stereotyped notions of “Aztec” garments, such as in the following photo. In this historical photo, the siblings are shown wearing ill-fitting and amateurly made clothes with triangle patterns and a sun on the front. Their hair is teased, flamboyantly so, and they are shown on the ground next to some sort of stone pillar, hinting at primitivism and savagery. The background of a staircase and entrance is blurred and



Image of the Aztec Children taken from [PENN Libraries Blog](#).

most likely painted, symbolizing lost civilizations and structures.

In order to better understand the cultural significance of the Aztec Children, it is important to know their historical past. The “twins,” as they were known, were in fact siblings, a brother and sister with the names of Maximo and Bartola, respectively. In Aztec Children research, one comes across different, conflicting versions of the same story, some more realistic than others. This more than likely occurred due a lack of documentation in third-world areas, such as Central America, as well as the false stories that were created in order to promote their popularity as freaks. If documentation did exist, it was neither official nor precise but forged. In fact, P.T. Barnum is an example of someone who forged the history of human exhibits, even though at one point he claimed to be “duped” by a “forged bill of sale” for Joice Heth, the supposedly 161-year old nursemaid of George Washington (Fretz 102-103). Because of her “deteriorated” appearance, Barnum worked to make the story of her age believable in order to elicit profit. The Aztec Twins were treated similarly by their owner-managers.

Rothfels notes, “The true origins of the ‘Aztecs’ ‘Bartola’ and ‘Maximo’ will probably never be known” (159). According to an 1854 article, their story began in the village of San Puerty, Guatemala. A different version states that

they came from El Salvador (this difference might have to do with shifting geographical boundaries over the years). In this version, the mother of the Aztec Children sold the two siblings to a man by the name of Raimond (or Raymond) Selva, who had the intent to display and profit from them. Rothfels describes an origin story that is viewed as the most historically accurate by scholars and gives more details than previous versions. It states that the brother and sister were actual twins birthed to Innocento and Martina Murgos from the town of Tococho in the Department of San Miguel and that Raimond Selva had taken a more active role in convincing the mother to sell them to him (Rothfels 159). This second version places responsibility for the exploitation of the Aztec Children on Selva, while the first story blames the mother.

One of the less realistic stories states that the siblings passed into the ownership of an American man. Another version of the story focuses on a man by the name of Pedro Velasquez in the year 1851. Pedro Velasquez was said to be a traveler who wrote a memoir published in 1850, about having “discovered” the ancient Aztec city of Iximaya with two other companions and left with two children (Aguirre 45). He proclaimed he had with him twins from this lost city and that the twins were “found squatting on an altar of idols” (Bogdan, “Maximo and Bartola” 128). Not only were they found in those positions, but they apparently “looked” like sculptured images of Aztec origin. Thus, they were deemed to be the last two survivors of the Aztec race (Stephens 33).

The next unrealistic story of Maximo and Bartola was created by their owner-manager, Morris. Morris fabricated this “history” after he learned about the traveler John Lloyd Stephens and his encounter with a Spanish Catholic priest in Central America (Aguirre 44). Robert Aguirre cites Stephens’s volume about a lost city with inhabitants—still living there and speaking the Mayan language—who would murder any white man who approached them (Aguirre 44). It turned out Stephens never went to that lost city, and, since that fact was not mentioned in his work, it left an opportunity to construct an origin story for the Aztec Children (45). The fabricated stories of the Aztec Children, their exhibition—which exemplified cultural stereotypes, and their display both of disability and race all did cultural work that brought in audiences. All of this worked to stigmatize other races and cultures as well as to confirm white superiority.

The Aztec Children, in their fame, eventually made their way into Europe in the year 1853. They toured for the remainder of their lives, often showcased privately to scientists and aristocrats. In 1867, in order to draw more attention to them, the Aztec Children were officially married, despite being brother and sister, under the names Maximo Valdez Nuñez and Bartola Velasquez (Rothfels 160). It is noteworthy to mention that the last name “Velasquez,” given to Bartola for the sake of this marriage, comes from the supposed “savior” of the Aztec Children. Maximo died in the year 1913, while Bartola’s exact date of death is unknown.

The Aztec Children, in all actuality, had a condition known as microcephaly. By definition, microcephaly is a condition characterized by an abnormally small head accompanied by an incomplete development of the brain (“Microcephaly”). Microcephaly was recognized in the scientific community during this time period, though people with this disability were often displayed in freak shows as “pinheads” (“Microcephaly”). Features that today point at developmental problems would have not been as obvious for audiences during the mid-1800’s, making it far easier for the fantastical and fictional stories of these “Aztec” beings to spread rapidly.

The description of the siblings, as well as pictures of them, show the obvious physical differences of individuals with microcephaly. The two became well known, not just due to their tours around America and Europe, but also through their display before the scientific community. Doctors and scientists flocked to the Aztec Children in an attempt to better understand and classify disability and cognitive problems, as Rothfels states in his essay:

The two were measured in every possible way: their skulls (twenty-eight separate measurements by Rudolf Virchow in 1877 to be expanded upon in later examinations) were compared to those of apes; their hair, cropped peculiarly to further the theatrical presentation of difference, was compared to that of all the known races...the scientists discussed the vocalizations, expressions of will, and potential reproductive capability of the pair. (Rothfels 166)

While Rothfels failed to comment on this in his discussion of disability, it is interesting to note the issue of consent. Due to the siblings’ cognitive disability, it is questionable whether informed consent was ever possible for them. They were unable to give clear definite agreement, and this resulted

in their own mother selling them in exchange for gold coins. The siblings were then paraded around the world in order to make fortunes for their owners without a say in their own fates.

Freaks who were physically, but not cognitively, disabled were able to give their consent, but even this consent presents ethical dilemmas for scholars. David Gerber states,

Choice and consent continue to be problematic precisely because of the role of circumstances, such as the accident of the social situation into which we are born, in our lives, and because we are not equal in power to influence the course of our lives or even to understand them. (Gerber 41)

The fact that the Aztec Children were developmentally disabled intensifies this problem.

The exhibition of the Aztec Children created not only a form of cheap entertainment but also a platform that both justified and conquered societal fears. The display of these “freaks” was directly tied to the thing that audiences at that time feared the most, namely an “other.” With evolutionary theory becoming a major issue during this time, it was no wonder audiences flocked towards these “Aztecs” (Rothfels 171). Such fears and other social and cultural issues during this time period will be addressed in the following section.

CULTURAL ISSUES REGARDING DISPLAYS

One reason for the multiple versions of Maximo and Bartola’s origin story is that the Aztec Children were handled by different managers and owners who concocted the stories to assure audiences of how other-worldly the siblings were. The managers may have had some facts, but they mixed fiction into the stories to get the audience’s attention. For example, Pedro Velasquez was made up, along with the lost city of Iximaya, in order to fabricate Maximo and Bartola’s origins. Their history in the 48-page booklet provided by Morris was a hoax; their origin story along with their appearances—“dwarfish” (Bogdan, “Maximo and Bartola” 128) with smaller-than-normal skulls due to microcephaly (Tredgold 122), which mimicked the Central American drawings and sculptures (Rothfels 159)—furthered the speculation that they were of Aztec origin. People took in the twins’ exhibition and believed these two to be part of a long-lost civilization. J.

Tithonus Pednaud's research on human marvels and bizarre history backs up this belief as he writes that they wore "Aztec-looking garb," especially the Aztec suns on their fronts (1). Rothfels writes their hair was "cropped peculiarly to further the theatrical presentation of difference" (166). This cut would expose more of their heads to show people that they looked like the drawings and sculptures of the Aztec people. This look distinguished the twins from "normal," "modern-day" people at the time.

When Maximo and Bartola were first placed on display in 1853 in Europe, they were exhibited before the Ethnological Society of England (Bogdan, "Maximo and Bartola" 130). According to Ronald Rainger's research on organizations of anthropology, this society was known for collecting ethnographic data and publishing materials to learn about mankind's "distinguishing characteristics" and what causes those characteristics (713). During that time, along with Britain's imperialism, the scientific community was fascinated with racial theory (Aguirre 41); in America, they wanted to learn more about other races and civilizations, like the Mayans, who had been the subjects of recent publications (Pednaud 1). Learning about the discovery of the "Aztecs" was just as desirable. Their microcephaly, a highly stigmatized trait, was used to make the Aztec Children and their entire "race" out to be inferior. This framed them, and their entire race, as the "other" when compared to Americans and Europeans.

Belief in white supremacy was common at the time. People of European descent believed they were culturally and morally superior (Gardiner 3) and that they were "more fit" in regards to physical and intellectual capacity than African Americans, Native Americans, etc., according to Social Darwinism (Gardiner 12). Rosemarie Garland Thomson recognizes this in her article, "The Cultural Work of American Freak Shows," as she stresses how freak shows were an "opportunity to formulate the self in terms of what it was not" (59), which means that audiences could define themselves as ideal in comparison to what they considered "inhuman": one who was not white, civilized, or able-bodied. Freak shows would assure spectators of their superior selves. Those represented as "freaks" could be anybody who was different from the norm in appearance or anybody considered "less evolved" or "primitive" in a white supremacist culture.

In Britain, scientists were drawn to Latin American people, especially the "mestizo" (Aguirre 41), which is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary*

as a person of Spanish and Native American heritage (“Mestizo”). To scientists, mixed race individuals “confounded reigning binary models” (Aguirre 41). Mixed races were disapproved of because some people interpreted them to be offspring of “sin.” There are Biblical verses that people saw as condemning interracial marriage. One example is from Deuteronomy 7:3-4, when Moses spoke with the Israelites: “Do not intermarry with them [Hittites, Jebusites, etc.]. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons, for they will turn your sons away from following me to serve other gods” (*NIV/KJV Parallel Bible*, Deut. 7:3-4). Mixing races was seen as going against the norms of society. The Aztec Children’s parents were “mulattos”—a period term for those with African and European heritage (Aguirre 56).

Because of the theory of polygenism, a theory stating that humans evolved from several independent pairs of ancestors (“Polygeny”), children of racially mixed couples were believed to be infertile (Aguirre 56). Not only would the Aztec Children be othered for being racially mixed, but their otherness would be confirmed if they could not produce children. According to Robert Bogdan’s article, “The Social Construction of Freaks,” human differences, both physical and mental, were considered “dangerous” and were used to warn people that these exhibits would need to be “controlled” so they could not “weaken the breeding stock” (34).

Maximo and Bartola’s small statures combined with their mental disabilities confirmed spectators’ beliefs that what they were seeing was a childish race. In one of the twins’ exhibitions in England, they were reported as behaving like “English children at two or three years of age” (Aguirre 52). Their small physical size allowed many spectators to see them as “children.” Their small heads were touched most of the time and were compared to “dolls’ heads.” But these touches weren’t necessarily forced on them. In fact, their acts “encouraged mutual interaction”: not only were the twins touched, but they also touched spectators (Aguirre 52-53). Unfortunately, as Gerber points out, shortness was stigmatized in and out of the Western world; it was thought to signal “immaturity and powerlessness” (49). Their mental condition was not emphasized, but they were not treated as the adults.

THE “AZTECS” AND EVOLUTION

Rothfels proclaims that, even though the story of their lives was in

question, Maximo and Bartola held an “important and almost unique place in history” (Rothfels 160). Whether people believed the story of Aztec origins or not, the scientific community saw their exhibition as a “preeminent site” for formulating and debating the “technical and philosophical features” of two theories: evolution and recapitulation (Rothfels 160-62). The latter theory is defined as the “repetition of evolutionary stages in the growth of a young animal” (“Recapitulation”).

For anatomist Carl Vogt, the twins’ microcephalism provided “the classic case for exploring the validity of recapitulation and the importance of arrested developments” (Rothfels 166). The latter subject is defined as “development stopped at some stage of its progress” (“Arrested”). That, along with recapitulation, would raise the question of whether the twins could present a “milestone” in the understanding of human evolution (Rothfels 166). In *The Descent of Man*, Charles Darwin takes note of Carl Vogt’s study with “microcephalous idiots.”

Their “skulls [were] smaller, and the convolutions of the brain [were] less complex, than in normal men. The frontal sinus... is largely developed, and the jaws are prognathous (projected forward), so that these idiots somewhat resemble the lower types of mankind” (116-17).

Their brains were thought to resemble those of apes (117), and thus it could be inferred that people like Maximo and Bartola might be seen as links between apes and humans. Given that they were presented as representatives of their race, the entire Latin American world was thus made “primitive.”

Maximo’s and Bartola’s features were measured and compared to apes’ features. One argument was that, if what the promoters said was true when they claimed these Aztec Children were really descendants of “primitive people,” then Maximo and Bartola would be part of a race somehow half-human and half-ape (Rothfels 166-67). In other words, their condition was seen as making them, not simply primitive, but also less human, equated with animals.

Rudolf Virchow, an anatomist, had a different opinion however. He did not believe the Aztec race was a “mature form of an extinct species or race.” Because of the idea of “survival of the fittest,” Virchow felt the Aztecs would not be fit to live (Rothfels 167). Virchow believed they would have died off long ago due to the arrested development of their cognitive abilities:

they would not understand how to survive and thrive. The Aztec Children, he thought, could not be part of that extinct race if they were still alive in the nineteenth century.

CONCLUSION

The exhibition of Maximo and Bartola offered to provide people a look into a lost civilization apart from the Western World and, in doing so, made Westerners feel superior. The Aztec Children were made to seem primitive in comparison. Because they were presented as representatives of an uncivilized, undeveloped, and primitive race, the stigma against them was extended to include an entire people. Even though it was all a hoax, people still believed in what managers' booklets said about the life story of the Aztec Children. The constructed origins and appearances of the Aztec Children, combined with their misunderstood microcephalic symptoms, contributed to their exhibition.

PRIMARY SOURCES

The boy, named "Maximo," is about ten years of age, and 33 3/4 inches in height; weighs 20 pounds 12 ounces; circumference of chest, which is well developed, 18 1/4 inches; ditto of waist, 17 inches; circumference of head, 12 3/4 inches.

The girl, named "Bartola," is about eight years of age, and 29 1/2 inches in height; weight, 17 pounds; circumference of head, 13 inches. In both, the arms and legs are of the pipe-step order of animal architecture, but are muscular, strong and tough. Their physiological and anatomical formations have been pronounced perfect after several very careful examinations. In short, they are like each other, and nobody else, and nothing else, living, dead, or imagined.

"The Aztec Children":

This newspaper article goes into great detail about the physical appearance of the Aztec Children. These children were such a physical anomaly that they gained headlines simply so others could picture their appearance prior

to seeing the show. While this newspaper article was not typical propaganda because it was not created by the exhibit itself, the information within the article was clearly provided by those exhibiting the Aztec Children. Without having to pay for or directly associate themselves with the story, the owners of the exhibit were able to publicize and attract interest simply by providing a newspaper with the fascinating and unusual physical description of these twins. These descriptions also made the exhibit seem educational—these people were not on display for entertainment but for their value as scientific discoveries. By providing the physical measurements of the twins, readers of the newspaper could visit them under the pretense they were fascinated from a scientific standpoint.

Illustrated Memoir:

In brief, these Aztec Children present the most extraordinary phenomenon in the human race ever witnessed by the modern world: let their origin be what it may—let their history and their country's history be ever so vague and traditionary—doubt the truth of Velasquez's narrative or believe it wholly, these children present themselves the eighth wonder of the world. They are, without exception, the most remarkable and intensely interesting objects that were ever presented to the European public.

This memoir was clearly a piece of promotional propaganda intended to entice and interest potential spectators. By publishing a memoir covering the expedition to and from the home of the Aztec Children, owner-managers legitimized the heritage of these twins. Rather than simply telling spectators the whole history of these twins at the beginning of a show, this pamphlet provided a history, an adventure story, thrilling action, an escape from uncivilized people, and a triumphant return to the safety of civilized society—all for what was no doubt a bargain of a price. The pamphlet opens with a list of each royal family the twins met while traveling through Europe on their tours prior to coming to America. The reader is then engaged in a gripping tale featuring diary entries describing both the journey and the people included in great detail. Nearly everyone in the party died, but the Aztec Children and their savior, Velasquez, miraculously lived. This tale would most likely be sold outside the tent exhibiting the twins. It would

ideally create a profit, interest people in the show, and potentially lead people to return to the exhibit after reading this supposed history.

“Marriage of the Aztec Children”:

The human monstrosities known here some years ago as the “Aztec Children” have recently been exhibited in England. The London papers report that they were married in that city on the 7th instant. The London Herald says:

“The bride was dressed in a Russian costume, presented to her by the Governor-General of Moscow; and the couple proceeded, with Mr. J. M. Morris, their guardian, to the office of the Registrar of St. George’s, Hanover Square, where, in the presence of the Registrar-General, who had issued the license after due inquiry whether there was any bar to the union, the couple were made one by civil contract. They then returned to their lodgings, where the girl was attired in a white satin dress, with a lace veil, an orange-blossom wreath, all, as well as the jewelry which she wore, being made for the occasion....”

This newspaper article was placed directly above other marriage notices, but the content is clearly different. The other marriage notices within this particular issue mentioned people within Philadelphia, the city where this paper was published. However, rather than just focusing on the local news, the Aztec Children were considered so notable that the paper needed to include the London *Herald’s* view on this marriage. Despite not being married within the United States, the Aztec Children served as so large an attraction that the news of their marriage traveled across the globe. It is also carefully noted that the Aztec Children had the permission of their guardian to get married, a requirement most men and women are not forced to adhere to. The article also focused carefully on their attire. This extra attention draws the reader’s notice away from the joy of the ceremony and toward a mental image of how these “freaks” might have appeared in traditional wedding dress.

Monroe Doctrine:

We owe it, therefore, to candor and to the amicable relations existing between the United States and those powers to declare that we should consider any attempt on their part to extend their system to any portion of this hemisphere as dangerous to our peace and safety. With the existing colonies or dependencies of any European power we have not interfered and shall not interfere. But with the Governments who have declared their independence and maintain it, and whose independence we have, on great consideration and on just principles, acknowledged, we could not view any interposition for the purpose of oppressing them, or controlling in any other manner their destiny, by any European power in any other light than as the manifestation of an unfriendly disposition toward the United States.

While one does not generally connect the Monroe Doctrine with the Aztec Children, this passage clearly shows how the two are related. Despite being just children, the Aztec Children were taken from their home and travelled around Europe and the United States as nothing more than a sideshow. The Monroe Doctrine clearly states that people from established lands in the Americas will not be bothered, but the Aztec Children were taken from their small community in Mesoamerica by outsiders. These outsiders were from the American continent themselves, but they directly violated the moral- and respect-based standards posed by the Monroe Doctrine. Rather than leaving these children to their life in a small, unknown community, these children were kidnapped and used as a commodity—the exact act the Monroe Doctrine sought to discontinue. European nations saw the Americas as a source of cheap labor and a land filled with foolish, uneducated people who could be used to better an educated man's existence. When the Aztec Children were taken and used in freak show, they served only to create a profit and amuse a middle- or upper-class family who chose to witness the spectacle of foreigners with strange, and seemingly disproportioned features.

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The First of its Kind: A Cultural History of the Village Nègre

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INTRODUCTION

In 1889, all eyes were on the city of Paris as it unveiled attractions that would be a part of that year's World's Fair. Among its exhibitions were a nearly fifteen hundred foot-long *Galerie de Machines*; exhibits from Europe, the Americas, and French colonies; and, of course, the Eiffel Tower, unveiled in

commemoration of the centennial celebration of the French Revolution (Ibach). One of the Fair's largest exhibits, however, is one that is rarely discussed, and it represents the dark era of colonialism in world history: the Village Nègre.

The Village Nègre, or Negro Village, was a large colonial exhibit which displayed over four hundred indigenous people from a host of French colonies. Opening on May 5, 1889, the Village Nègre was one of the Fair's most popular exhibitions, drawing over twenty eight million spectators in the almost six months it was open. The exhibit's popularity stemmed from its uniqueness as the first of its kind—that is, an ethnological exhibit that showcased more than just a small group of individuals. The likes of it had never been seen in Europe or America (Dos Santos and Lewino). Throughout this paper, we will argue that the Village Nègre was used to draw a line between the “civilized” and the “savage,” while it also served as a form of propaganda for colonialism and the establishment of European dominance in the world.

The large size of the Village made it impossible for it to be in the middle of the Fair; rather, the Village was found on the *Esplanade des*

Abstract

The Village Nègre, one of the largest exhibits in the 1889 World's Fair, was home to over four hundred indigenous people from various French colonies. Throughout this paper, the authors discuss how the Village Nègre was used by the French to draw a line between the “civilized” and the “savage.” The Village also served as a form of colonialist propaganda while further establishing European dominance.

Invalides, a short walk from the Eiffel Tower, around which the majority of the Fair was based (Zeitoun). Though called the Village Nègre, the exhibit was actually comprised of six smaller “villages” in which people ate, slept, and worked. Although the nationalities of every person exhibited are unknown, experts are certain that the exhibit displayed Arabs, Kanaks (who are the indigenous Melanesian people of New Caledonia in the Southwest Pacific), the Gabonese, Congolese, Javanese (from Java, Indonesia), and Senegalese, all of whom were from areas that had been colonized by France. The exhibition, however, was not completely authentic; for example, one of the smaller villages that was named the Pahouin Village did not even contain Pahouin people—they were put in a different area (Dos Santos and Lewino).

Life in the Village included not only performing daily tasks, such as cleaning, eating, and creating art—which was then sold as “authentic” to make a profit—but also giving several theatrical performances. Women danced while naked, and men played drums and staged fights, which were extremely popular with spectators. Some even performed tribal “rituals,” although experts cannot confirm whether these rituals were actually representative of cultures presented in the Village (Bancel, Blanchard, and Lemaire). Given the disregard by French officials for the differences between each culture, it is doubtful that these rituals were grounded in any real cultural customs. This disregard demonstrates that the exhibit really was intended to display France’s dominance of the “savage” parts of the world.

As they watched these rituals, spectators were fascinated by the people in the Village Nègre. Fairgoers were able to watch exhibited people go about their daily lives, which supposedly gave a glimpse of what was believed to be the true culture of these “savages.” Visitors to the Village were encouraged to touch the people on display and get up close and personal in order to more fully understand different cultures. In addition to common folks, scientists from all over the world visited the Fair in order to observe and study the people exhibited while they carried out their daily tasks (Zeitoun).

Science was one of the main motivations for bringing colonized people to Paris to be put on display. Because the Village Nègre was one of the earliest large-scale ethnographic exhibits, people were fascinated with learning about the cultures that the people represented—scientists used the study of these people to form a so-called “race biology,” which aimed to prove “the congenital inferiority of races with ‘depressed or squeezed

skulls” (Zeitoun). In other words, the scientific study of ethnographic exhibits, such as the Village Nègre, permitted scientists to develop the scientific racism that was accepted and supported by public opinion.

It was not only the scientists that promoted racism in the Village. Ordinary visitors also used the exhibit to form their own opinions on where the “savages” fit on the scale of race. Historian Pascal Blanchard and anthropologist Gilles Boëtsch explain that there is a direct link between the human exhibits and the general public’s prejudices:

the shows of anthropological zoology were the essential vehicles of the passage of scientific racism to vulgar colonial racism... for their visitors, seeing populations of people behind bars, real or symbolic, sufficed to explain a hierarchy. They quickly understood where the power was found. (226)

The way in which these subjects were exhibited communicated to the predominantly white audience that Europeans were the ones in power and that they should look down on different races. These opinions were cemented in the minds of spectators as they visited the Village Nègre.

The Village Nègre was just one exhibit in a long list of ethnological exhibitions that influenced the larger field of anthropology, which was becoming extremely important at the height of colonialism. While the Village Nègre was undoubtedly the largest zoo of its kind, human zoos were not new to Europe; similar exhibits were common in large cities, including Hamburg, Barcelona, London, and Milan. All of these exhibits shared the common goal of fitting colonized peoples into categories carefully constructed by those responsible for the human zoos. The most important goal of these anthropological exhibitions was attempting to draw the line between “civilized” and “savage.”

Though the Village was promoted as an “authentic” representation of life in “savage” lands, its decorations, costumes, and accessories created caricatures and stereotypes of the people and cultures in the human zoo (Dos Santos and Lewino). Therefore, when scholars look back on this exhibit for study, it brings up the issue of cultural appropriation. White Europeans, while “repulsed” by the indigenous people, were simultaneously fascinated by the unknown cultures from whence they came. Dean MacCannell writes that tourists, such as those who visited the Village Nègre, “are motivated by a desire to see life as it is really lived, even to get in with the natives” (592).

MacCannell further states, “Touristic consciousness is motivated by its desire for authentic experiences” (597).

Unfortunately, however, the tourists of the World’s Fair did not take the time to actually learn about these cultures and instead imposed a culture upon the human exhibits. In fact, according to MacCannell, they followed the steps of staged authenticity, as the exhibition was “totally set up in advance for touristic visitation” (597). Fair organizers did not actually care about an authentic representation of cultures but rather focused on staging the exhibit so that it would make visitors get the feeling of authenticity. The people within the Village Nègre performed the culture that Europeans thought they *should* perform.

The Village Nègre was one of the main attractions of the Fair, and, while it was intended to dazzle spectators with new and unknown cultures, the French government had other motives. The Village also acted as propaganda for French colonialism: “The power of exhibits of ‘the other’ created a strong political context and an historic movement of expansion on an unprecedented scale” (Bancel, Blanchard, and Lemaire 16). Each of the four hundred people in the Village came from one of France’s many colonies. As European colonialism was at its height at the end of the nineteenth century, France needed a way to show its own people, as well as the world, its colonial prowess and power. Not only could the French show that they had a great deal of land, but they also were able to exhibit the people who came from those lands—they used the Village Nègre to justify their takeover of Northern Africa and parts of Asia by showing the public these “uncultured” and “uncivilized” “savages.”

Not only were the French showing their power, but the exhibit also encouraged other nations to pursue colonialist conquests. The portrayal of the people in the exhibit as savages created the sense of an urgent need to continue colonization in order to help these people become cultured like their European and American saviors. These “savages” became novelties to their viewers, and they were viewed as uncultured but also delightfully simple creatures. The notion of the “noble savage”—“a mythic conception of people belonging to non-European cultures as having innate natural simplicity and virtue uncorrupted by European civilization” (“Noble Savage”)—emerged as early as the previous century, and it was one that a great deal of colonizers used to justify their actions. In the colonizers’ eyes,

it was up to European nations—those who were truly civilized—to help those from other cultures learn how to fit in to their society.

One of the earliest ethnographic human exhibits on a large scale, the Village Nègre was visited by an enormous amount of people during its time at the 1889 World's Fair, people who were thus forced not only to compare themselves to the culture of the savages but also to contemplate their roles as the “civilized ones.” This exhibit encouraged cultural appropriation and continued colonialism that failed to attempt to understand the cultures which Europeans and Americans were taking advantage of. Though over a century has passed since the end of the exhibit, the dark connotations of the Village Nègre, in which we were unable and unwilling to learn from the cultures of others, continues to linger throughout society.

CULTURAL ANALYSIS

The display of these human beings in their “savage” habitats served as a way to prove how advanced European cultures were in comparison to their seemingly uncivilized counterparts. But what strategies were used in order to display them in an entertaining fashion? In order to persuade the audience to believe these indigenous people were, in fact, uncivilized, the organizers of the World's Fair disguised themselves as anthropologists and presented these displays in so-called “authentic” settings. While an observer of this tactic may feel appalled, the organizers of the fair felt more credible by telling the public that they were anthropologists who displayed these cultures rather than people whose goals were centered on fiscal prosperity.

These displays presented the impression of savagery in exotic nations, and, by juxtaposing the middle-class fair-goers alongside “savage” individuals, the fair organizers were able to emphasize contrast between “civilization and barbarity” as well as “progress and primitivism” (Munro 81). By doing so, the so-called “savages” who represented their respective cultures “accentuated” the colonial power of European nations over those deemed more uncivilized. This gave a false depiction of those who were exhibited. While they may have used handcrafted tools in their normal lives, they were not completely incompetent, as the mock anthropologists deemed them to be. As a result of the inaccurate depictions of the indigenous people put on display, the visitors returned to their “normal” lives in their “civilized” communities under the impression that these

people lived in a barbaric and crude manner.

Fair visitors treated the products of these barbaric displays as trophies and souvenirs. The organizers who acted as anthropologists arranged false artifacts around the displays in order to reenact their own vision of the world, and they also explained national histories to suit their political purposes through the use of imposed narrative structures (Munro 81). While these artifacts seemed natural to the viewers, many were fictitious depictions of the real artifacts used in their home cultures. Yet viewers were given the impression that they could purchase original artifacts from “uncivilized” cultures.

Human exhibitions largely led to the creation of national museums not only in European countries but in the United States as well. For example, a similar American display occurred shortly after the 1889 World’s Fair in Paris. At the 1904 World’s Fair in St. Louis, over one thousand different people from at least ten different countries were put on display (Allen). The ethnographic items left behind from these human displays found homes in spectacles within many of the new museums, in which they served to falsely portray the life and cultures of those who were exhibited (Munro 81). The problem of false representation lingers today, since these artifacts are still being exhibited in museums. Not only can people still see the deceptive relics, but they can also still observe the larger political issues underlying these displays.

While audiences could compare their own progress to the barbarity portrayed within such human displays, they also gained a greater sense of their relationship to their own countries. Even though the people visiting these exhibits may not have possessed a physical or even mental relationship with one another, the exhibits created an imaginary bond by increasing the spectators’ national identity (Munro 82). By accentuating the differences between these “savage” peoples and their viewing counterparts, the organizers were able to emphasize the colonial power of European nations over “uncivilized” colonies (Munro 84). The viewers were given the impression that their own countries possessed a greater hold over their international properties than “savages” did.

While giving the viewers a chance to witness their own nation’s hold over other countries certainly was a result of the fair, the human exhibits also prompted other realizations. In these displays, a bridge formed

between entertainment and conceptions of race based on Social Darwinism (Munro 81). Viewers already felt their entitlement magnified by witnessing the false, but seemingly accurate, depictions of other cultures. The exhibits inadvertently unveiled the visions of the elite. They thus brought white privilege to the forefront—all at the expense of the humanity of those from colonized cultures.

As the World Fair's popularity increased, so did the prestige of the government of France. This occurred because the Village Nègre was grounded in assumptions about the correct social order and the distribution of power within society (Munro 86). Such exhibits made the middle class more aware of how they themselves were perceived in relation to their own societal values. Witnessing the seemingly accurate depiction of other cultures could make spectators more conscious of how they themselves were depicted within society.

Spectators trusted the view of other cultures that they were given by the World's Fair, in part because of its aid in boosting the French economy, which was struggling before the World's Fair began. Millions of people constructed and found employment within the World's Fair, while volunteers also spread the word to relatives and friends, resulting in heightened popularity for the fair (Munro 81). Because of the fair's popularity, increased job openings allowed those who had been struggling to find work to prosper at the expense of those who remained locked behind bars in human displays.

The French World's Fair was not unique in presenting a human zoo; other countries hosted smaller fairs in which they also displayed human exhibits. Countries such as Australia, Brazil, Guatemala, Indonesia, Jamaica, New Zealand, and South Africa created human exhibitions but did so in ways to suit their own economic needs (Munro 87). While France presented their exhibits in ways that showed their dominance over their international colonies, other countries, some the same ones featured in the Paris displays, imitated European exhibits in ways that matched their own political, economic, social, and cultural needs.

The Village Nègre explicitly encompassed aspects of colonialism in its exhibits. This allowed fairgoers to leave with the impression that France provided a great deal of help to those who lived in different sectors of the world, when, in reality, the French were colonizing them. The exploitation

of the indigenous people at the 1889 Paris World's Fair illustrated France's need for both economic expansion and a sense of entitlement over the "barbaric savages" on display.

ARTIFACTS

Exposition Poster:

This is a poster that was used to advertise the Parisian World's Fair in 1889. It does a good job of painting Paris in a positive light, with bright colors and a well-executed design, while also communicating important information like ticket prices, times, etc. On the main part of the poster, it reads, "World Exposition 1889 of Paris: Opening of the Exposition." This relates to our argument in that it shows the importance France placed on this exposition. It gives you a great mental image of the Parisian streets covered in these posters, advertising this outstanding and monumental event, and allows you to place yourself in that time and feel more a part of that culture. We would also argue that this poster is displaying the exposition as an important cultural event, and, while in many ways it was, the human exhibition that occurred at this exhibition was cruel and inhumane towards all the human beings that were exhibited. The French strove to emphasize growth in technology (i.e., the Eiffel Tower); the Village Nègre added to the sense of cultural superiority that came along with that growth.



Map of Villages:

This map, much like the exposition poster, allows you to become more acquainted with the actual World's Fair that took place in Paris. You can actually see where each exhibition was placed and how a good chunk of the exposition was arranged. We believe that this map lets you place yourself into the fair and

get a good sense of what it was like to be walking around and witnessing a human zoo firsthand. While it is impossible to fully understand what transpired at this World's Fair, this map gives you a better idea of the exposition itself. This relates to our argument in that it shows how much time and effort went into putting this World Exposition together, as is to be expected. But more specifically, it shows how much time went into exhibiting the human beings that were on display in The Village Nègre. This map is a good example of the manner in which these large quantities of people were exposed for the world to see, touch, and gawk at.

The Village Nègre included:

The Algerian Palace, The Tunisian Palace, Senegalese Village; Loango (now Congo) Village, Pahouin (central Africa) Village, Tonkin (now Vietnam) Village, Indonesian Village, Indian Village; buildings for Annam and Tonkin (now Vietnam), Madagascar, Guadeloupe, French Guinea, and Kanak (now Malaysia); the Pagoda of Tonkin gods, Anatomy Theater, and multiple bazaars, boutiques, and restaurants.

New York Times article, “**Scientific Religion**”:

This newspaper article from the year of the Parisian World's Fair discusses St. George Mivart, Ph. D.'s opposition to Charles Darwin's theory of evolution. Mivart does not completely oppose Darwin's theory; he adds “certain details which might be used as the basis for important differences from the results otherwise drawn from Darwin's presentment of the question.” Specifically, he adds the idea of religion and “Divine Energy” to Darwin's theory. This article correlates well with our argument by showing the importance of Charles Darwin even to those scholars still holding firm beliefs in regards to their religious values. By making the statement that “the reconciliation of evolution and religion has been undertaken by many besides Dr. Mivart, but few have written with such fullness and gone into the question to a like depth,” this article emphasizes the importance and influence of Darwin's writing on the society at this time. This could explain the inherent curiosity about the people believed to be more “primitive” than the citizens of Paris at this point in time. We believe this to properly illustrate the allure of human beings who seemed close to the “missing link” side of Darwin's theories to those attending the exhibition.

New York Times article, “Paris and the Great Show”:

This newspaper article discusses the economic unrest that was occurring in Paris around the time that the World’s Fair was taking place. While France was in the middle of a financial crisis, the headline still read, “A Cheerful Welcome in Spite of the Unrest.” The article goes on to discuss the great lengths that the Parisian government is willing to go to in order to make the summer of 1889 (beginning of the World Expo.) be a “happy” summer by stating, “It must also be thoroughly understood that, in spite of money losses and political apprehension, strangers will not frown on the smiling and welcoming face of their Parisienne hostess. The sun will shine and music will play.” This relates to the argument that is threaded throughout our cultural history project because it gives a great tidbit of background information that helps place our research about the 1889 World’s Fair and what was happening in Paris at the time that this exposition was taking place. This article supports our claims that the Village Nègre was partially an offensive and exploitative way to generate capital for the Parisian economy that was faltering at the time.

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¹ All articles written in French were translated by Lauren Seitz

“What Am I?": Nineteenth-Century Medical Science, Intersexuality, and Freakification in the Life of Karl Hohmann

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The gender and sex binary have existed in Western culture for centuries. Western societies attempt to classify biological sex and gender as either male or female. However, this binary does not include any space for people who do not fit, such as a person who has external male genitalia but internal female genitalia. The modern medical term for this phenomenon is “intersex;” before the twentieth century, however, intersex was called “hermaphroditism.” Because the current medical term is “intersex,” we will use the term “intersex” instead of “hermaphrodite” where appropriate, unless directly quoting from a text.

During the nineteenth century, there was an intense medical examination of intersex individuals. Scientists were searching for a physical state they called a “true lateral hermaphrodite,” referring to a person who has intact male reproductive organs on one side of their body and female reproductive organs on the other (Munde 615, 629). For many, the fascination of this “true lateral hermaphrodite” was the idea that the intersex individual could maintain both sexes simultaneously, which supported the notions of the gender and sex binary.

Their search for the “true lateral hermaphrodite” eventually led doctors and scientists to Karl Hohmann, an intersex man whom doctors endlessly poked, prodded, and examined in an effort to determine whether

Abstract

This paper explores the life of Karl Hohmann, an intersex individual who lived in Germany in the mid-1800s. Hohmann was examined as a medical specimen throughout his adult life as doctors at the time believed he was a “true lateral hermaphrodite.” The authors examine the way that cultural beliefs about gender and sex intersected in the nineteenth century.

he had both a testicle and an ovary. Because his body was a site of so much medical attention, these scientists eventually turned Hohmann into a mere medical specimen and robbed him of his humanity.

This essay is divided into three sections. First, it presents the life of Karl Hohmann and his interactions with nineteenth-century doctors. Second, it situates that history within the context of ideas about gender and sex during the same time period. Finally, it provides five artifacts from the time period that address both Karl Hohmann and the cultural context. Together, this essay illuminates how Karl Hohmann's freakification reinforced the social creation of gender and sex as a binary system and supported the normalcy of heterosexual culture.

INTRODUCTION

“What am I? In my life an object of scientific experiment, and after my death an anatomical curiosity?”—Karl Hohmann

Before we discuss Karl Hohmann's life, we should clarify our references to his gender and the pronouns we use to refer to him. Many sources on Hohmann refer to him as “Kathrina/Karl Hohmann” and alternate between using masculine and feminine pronouns. In this paper, we will refer to Hohmann as Karl and use masculine pronouns. Although Hohmann was designated female at birth and lived most of his life identifying as a female, when he moved to the United States, he legally changed his name to Karl. Although we do not have much documentation on Hohmann's gender identity, we feel it is best to speak of him with the identity that he chose (to the best of our knowledge) throughout this essay.

Karl Hohmann was born in Mellrichstadt, Germany in 1824. When he was thirty-nine years old, he visited a doctor because he was experiencing pain from a hernia on his left side. His physician, Dr. Reder, wished to examine Hohmann more thoroughly because he believed that it was possible that Hohmann's hernia actually contained a testicle (Mak 65). At this time, Hohmann identified as woman, and the presence of a testicle would have placed him outside of the sexual binary. For some time, Hohmann resisted being subject to a thorough examination but eventually agreed. Hohmann was brought to a hospital where he was observed for two months. The doctors who examined him kept him almost completely isolated from other patients or visitors, and the examinations that Hohmann experienced

were very invasive. Measurements were taken of his genitalia, and his bodily fluids were collected and studied as well. In addition to inspecting his body, the physicians examining Hohmann asked him invasive questions about his personal life. Hohmann admitted to having sexual intercourse with a woman and consequently impregnating her. Hohmann's claim was met with incredulity by several doctors who then requested that Hohmann demonstrate how he was able to have intercourse with a woman while a group of physicians observed (Munde 624). This clearly shows the lack of privacy that those who were exhibited experienced. Not only would people on display lack personal privacy while being exhibited, but they were expected to allow others to observe their private moments.

After this initial examination, Hohmann was examined by doctors across Europe from the 1860s through the 1870s; when he moved to New York, he was inspected by two other physicians (Mak 66). Because there was so much shame and stigma surrounding intersex individuals, it was difficult for doctors to get people to agree to these medical examinations. Hohmann was one of the most famous "hermaphrodites on show" in the medical community (Mak 66).

As a "true lateral hermaphrodite," Hohmann was especially interesting to the doctors at the time because they believed he had male and female reproductive organs in his body—one type on each side—which would confirm a binary notion of gender. The biggest reason that the doctors believed this was possible was that Hohmann appeared to have at least one testicle, but also experience a menstrual-like discharge about once every month (Munde 624). Because of this, several of the doctors that examined him speculated that Hohmann had at least one ovary. This was significant because the doctors felt unable to determine if Hohmann was a "true lateral hermaphrodite" without physical evidence of an ovary, which would require an autopsy.

The doctors who examined him seemed preoccupied with determining how to categorize Hohmann and wanted to find a "true" answer to what his identity was. One physician even noted that his identity could only be discovered "post-mortem" because they would need to do an autopsy in order to determine whether or not he had an ovary (Mundé). An autopsy does not allow intersex individuals to define themselves; rather, it only provides physical evidence for a doctor to examine.

These examinations of Karl Hohmann brought up many questions that challenged the idea of a gender or sexual binary; as a result, medical categorization and the search for “true lateral hermaphrodite” provided an answer to these challenges. In Western culture, the idea of a gender binary is still common today. At the time Hohmann was living, this model of sex and gender was even more prevalent than it is today. Nevertheless, people had a hard time imagining how someone outside of this rigid binary could exist, and therefore intersex individuals often lived in shame.

CULTURAL ANALYSIS

Intersex individuals have long held a strange place in the freakshow culture of the Western World. Even amongst the types of bodies considered aberrant by mainstream society, the accounts of these individuals are underreported. There is not a wealth of information made widely available about them, and many texts of the nineteenth century that speak of intersexuality are medical texts which examine the bodies of various individuals as specimens to be examined, drawn, photographed, and autopsied. What, then, do these medical reports and papers reveal about the lives of intersex individuals, and what can these individuals’ lives reveal about gender, sex, and sexuality in the nineteenth century?

To answer these questions, we must first begin by seeking to define the differences between sex and gender. Sex is held to be the biological fact of one’s body determined by several indicators such as chromosomes, internal reproductive organs, and external genitalia (American Psychological Association 11). Gender, however, describes categories of cultural expectations that are constructed around the labels of sex. The traditional labels of Western culture in both cases have been the male and the female. It seems like a fairly simple dualism—sex is a scientific and medical fact while gender is a social construction—but these widely held definitions do not address the socially constructed nature of science and therefore of sex.

It would be a mistake to say that sex is a purely objective measure of the human body. This is not to say that the human body cannot be measured or physical phenomena observed, but instead that these observations are interpreted through the lens of cultural and historical context. For example, we can safely say that some human bodies possess ovaries while some others possess testicles, but the actual labels of female and male are constructed categories that we assign to these different types of

individuals. This is why the sex binary we often put faith in— that there are male bodies and female bodies—fails to account for intersex individuals.

These labels of male and female are important in Western society though. Prior to the nineteenth century and its focus on medicine as a science, sex and sexuality were regulated by the prominent religious doctrines of the time. They held that sexual intercourse should only be practiced in an effort to produce children and that any other types of intercourse were sinful (Fausto-Sterling 11). This produced a need for labels that would reflect the ability to reproduce; the two involved would need to be a man, someone who could sire a child, and a woman, someone who could carry a child. This also explains the importance of heterosexuality as it appeared later; heterosexual intercourse was seen as the only kind which would produce a child, so it became the default and “natural” sexual orientation.

Then, as medical science developed in the nineteenth century, it sought to provide scientific justifications for these long held ideas of male and female. But this distinction is not so easily made, and through much of the nineteenth century—and even into the present—there is no one characteristic or set of characteristics that is universally held as an indicator of someone’s “real” sex (Dreger 16). Many point to the external genitalia as a good indicator of sex, the method which is still used to categorize newborn infants by doctors, but this does not account for any number of hormonal disorders or other differences which might occur in the development of the human body (Fausto-Sterling 45). The several different factors which can be indicators of sex — the number and type of sex chromosomes of an individual, their hormonal profile — do not even have to agree with each other. As a result, the individual in question might never know that their body is intersex, as modern medical practices require the infant to be assigned to a sex category within twenty-four hours of birth.

Instead, scientists of the nineteenth century worked to understand the human body through the preexisting idea of a gender and sex binary. They confirmed in many cases that women possess a uterus, ovaries, and other physical characteristics, while men have testicles and a penis. But there is a range of difference between individuals in these categories, and there is a range of difference that exists outside them as well—a continuum of human difference that does not fit into two separate boxes. Those who exist outside

the limits of the gender/sex binary are intersex individuals; their bodies cannot be classified as male or female, either because they possess markers of both sexes or because they possess neither. But, when viewed through the idea of a gender/sex binary, the intersex individual becomes inherently abnormal.

The idea of the abnormal intersexual is very important at this time period. Because human bodies can vary so widely and because medical science cannot neatly divide between male and female, the debate then becomes one of normal versus abnormal. Alice Dreger notes in her work on nineteenth-century “hermaphrodites” that “we assume that the normal (in this case the ‘normal’ sexual anatomy) existed before we encountered the abnormal, but it is really only when we are faced with something that we think is ‘abnormal’ that we find ourselves struggling to articulate what ‘normal’ is” (6). The existence of individuals outside the gender/sex binary—outside the “normal”—forced medical practitioners and scientists of the mid-nineteenth century to question what really defined male and female bodies.

But they could not escape the idea of a gender/sex binary, even in their examination of intersex individuals; medical scientists began to look for a “real” lateral hermaphrodite, or an intersex individual who is male on one side of their body and female on the other, such as Josephine Joseph of the film *Freaks*. This was often labelled a “true” type of hermaphroditism as the individual possessed both male and female reproductive organs (Dreger 143). However, the medical finds of the time more often showed a mixed or “false” type of hermaphrodite—an individual who possessed only male or female reproductive organs, even if their outward appearance might be otherwise misleading. For example, notes on Guiseppe Marzo’s autopsy in 1865 indicate that his feet and hands were feminine while his head and body hair were distinctly masculine in appearance (Delle Piane 1211). Even here, the gender/sex binary is influencing medical practice and observation, though it falls short of actually describing the realities of human variation.

There must be significance, then, to the gender/sex binary if scientists continued to cling to it despite its inaccuracy. This ties back to the pre-Victorian religious views on sex — ones that encourage only heterosexual intercourse. The gender/sex binary is necessary to defining heterosexual relations versus homosexual relations. Sex must exist in order to define

these categories of sexuality, and therefore to define the acceptable types of sexual intercourse. The intersex individual is a threat to this system and to heterosexuality itself. In fact, many medical scientists of this time emphasized the need for a clear sex indicator in order to prevent accidental homosexuality and homosexual marriage (Dreger 76).

It became a noted practice that someone suspected of homosexuality should be examined to ensure that their biological sex was not misdiagnosed (Dreger 111). In the middle of the nineteenth century, when the word “homosexual” was first coined (Fausto-Sterling 13), the most reasonable explanation for this deviant behavior was that it was merely a type of heterosexual intercourse. Unfortunately, this works to not only reinforce the gender/sex binary but to also erase the experiences of homosexual individuals of the time. Looking at the accounts of many individual cases, there appears to be no actual correlation between biological sex and sexuality, or between the intersexual body and homosexual experience (Dreger 126). But, even so, the fear of homosexual intercourse—or any manner of non-heterosexual intercourse—led many people of the nineteenth and early-twentieth century to cling to the gender/sex binary.

Karl Hohmann’s own case falls squarely into the center of this scientific confusion and controversy. His story was especially noted because of the claim that he had impregnated a woman while living as a woman himself—a blurring of not only the biological sex binary but also of heterosexual and homosexual intercourse as well. In this tempestuous cultural climate, Hohmann became an item to study and display, subject to aggressive and invasive medical examination, because he defied easy classification by means of biological sex, gender, and sexuality. His life experiences and anatomy fell outside of the defined “normal,” and this condemned him to be an object of speculation before the burgeoning medical community that sought to force the world into matching their own beliefs.

Today, this need to categorize the sexes into pre-existing categories and to justify those categories with scientific research, has led to a false belief in the absolute “reality” of the male and female bodies as distinct entities. This belief appears in the current discussions on sex and sexuality that pertain to transgender individuals and their rights to use public restrooms. Many opponents to transgender rights argue that allowing

transgender men into women's restrooms would endanger the women who use them. However, this argument relies on the notion that gender is split between male and female and that biological sex determines a person's sex at birth and cannot be changed.

As the fight over transgender rights demonstrates, there is no more clear distinction between the sexes now than there was during Karl Hohmann's lifetime. Research into chromosomal sex and hormonal sex has only complicated the factors which medical professionals must observe, while common medical practice still relies upon the visual examination of genitalia to determine an infant's sex. This belief is misleading and has the potential to distort any situation where the labels of male and female are used, such as scientific studies, the division of male and female sports and public restrooms, or even the laws regarding marriage and identity. The distinction between sexes is a socially organized and constructed line that holds itself up as scientific fact, and the root of this un-truth lies amongst the medical field of the nineteenth century.

ARTIFACTS

Artifact 1

This excerpt comes from a scientific encyclopedia, published in 1901, called the *Anomalies and Curiosities of Medicine*; this encyclopedia discusses a large number of medical "abnormalities." In this excerpt, the authors, George M. Gould and Walter L. Pyle, discuss the ways in which the sexual attraction experienced by Catherine/Charles

There is an account of a person in Germany who, for the first thirty years of life, was regarded as feminine, and being of loose morals became a mother. At a certain period she began to feel a change in her sexual inclinations; she married and became the father of a family. This is doubtless a distortion of the facts of the case of Catherine or Charles Hoffman, born in 1824, and who was considered a female until the age of forty. At puberty she had the instincts of a woman, and cohabited with a male lover for twenty years. Her breasts were well formed and she menstruated at nineteen. At the age of forty-six her sexual desires changed, and she attempted coitus as a man, with such evident satisfaction that she married a woman soon afterward. (207)

Hoffman (or Karl Hohmann) changed over time. At first, he is described as being female and having “sexual inclinations” toward men early in life. When he is older, they describe his sexual desires as “changing,” which also correlates with a change in his gender and classification from a “mother” to a “father.” Because his gender and sexuality change simultaneously, his gender always aligns with his sexuality so as to make him heterosexual and not homosexual. In framing the description of Hohmann in this manner, Gould and Walter reinforce the aversion toward homosexuality and non-heterosexual intercourse at the time.

Artifact 2

The following excerpt is from a short article published by A. Flint in the *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* in 1840.

In Flint’s article, he describes a patient who is admitted to an almshouse who had the appearance of an intersex person, but whom he calls a “hermaphrodite.” In this excerpt, Flint describes the physical appearance of the supposed hermaphrodite. One significant aspect of the man’s appearance is that, at first sight, his physical characteristics are conflicting enough to hinder the doctors from deciding in which ward (male or female) to place the individual. Also, the blend of feminine and masculine physical traits (such as his feminine complexion and hairstyle coupled with masculine feet and a beard on his chin and lips) demonstrates the existence of traits of both genders in the

The following curious case of imposture came under my observation in the month of March, 1840.

An individual was received into the Erie County Almshouse, who was represented as being a hermaphrodite. I was requested to examine him, the superintendent being at a loss whether to place him in the male or female department of the institution. His external appearance was as follows. Hair, black and long, arranged after the feminine mode. Face, having a masculine coarseness, but with a fair, feminine complexion. Some beard on the chin and upper lip, which had evidently never been shaven. Ear-rings in the ears. Hands, delicate but large. Feet, large and masculine. He was dressed in pantaloons and a frock coat. His voice and manner of walking resembled those of a female. The former in tone was not peculiarly feminine, but the air and manner of speaking strikingly so. The gait, in walking, was so peculiar, that no one could avoid the suspicion that the individual was a woman in male attire. (145-146)

individual's appearance. Altogether, this description of this patient's physical appearance sheds light on the importance of physical characteristics and appearance to the construction of a gender and sex binary in the nineteenth century.

Artifact 3

This excerpt was published in an article in 1876 in *The American Journal of Obstetrics and Diseases of Women and Children*. Paul F. Mundé, the author of "A Case of Presumptive True Lateral Hermaphroditism," was one of the physicians who examined Karl Hohmann. In this brief excerpt, Mundé claims that Hohmann could indeed be a true lateral hermaphrodite. This excerpt demonstrates how ideas of a concrete

At the meeting of the New York Obstetrical Society, held October 5th, 1875, I exhibited before the Society an individual in male attire, who claims to possess – with what right it is partly the object of this paper to show – the characteristics of both the male and the female sex united in her person, and to be a unique instance of that anomaly known as *hermaphrodisia vera lateralis*, true lateral hermaphroditism (one lateral half of the body containing the germinal gland of the female, the ovary, and presenting female peculiarities; the other half containing the germinal gland of the male, the testicle, and showing male attributes). (615)

gender binary were imposed upon the scientific understanding of human bodies. Scientists conceived that the *hermaphrodisia vera lateralis* would have a testical on one side of the body and an ovary on the other side, both separate yet simultaneously existing in the same body. This shows the constricted ways in which the gender and sex binary affected the ways in which scientists viewed the human body. It also explains how scientists resolved the ambiguity of intersex individuals by focusing instead on a "true" form of intersex that fit inside their notions of gender.

Artifact 4

The following artifact is a brief newspaper article titled "Case of Hermaphroditism" published in the *Medical and Surgical Reporter* on December 12, 1868. The subject of the article is Catharina Hohmann (Karl Hohmann). The newspaper article demonstrates the extent to which Karl and other intersex people sought after medical examinations of their bodies and how they advertised for medical doctors. Also, the latter half of the

appearance. Altogether, this description of this patient's physical appearance sheds light on the importance of physical sexes but belonging to neither is evidence of the cultural fears of blending genders and sexes. Finally, Hohmann's last statement is indicative of the predicament of intersex individuals at the time: their lives were full of scientific inquiry and probing while their deaths were slated for postmortem dissection.

Catharina Hohmann, who presents in her (his?) own person a remarkable case of hermaphrodisia vera lateralis, which has been described by Prof. Rokitansky and others, is on her travels in Germany exhibiting her unique malformation. She complains, however, that in Vienna the authorities put a stop to her turning an honest penny in this way, 'aus sittlichkeits-rucksichten.' So she advertises in the *Wiener Medicinische Wochenschrift* that she can be examined at her own rooms by those interested in her case.

A journalist who saw her writes to *Vienna Presse*: 'I pitied the poor creature. Although in good health, and of robust, and even beautifully shaped form, she sat before me in deep distress and wept. And she has wept already a great deal in her joyless life. She loves a man for twelve years; he loved her, too, and even proposed to her to go with him to America, where nobody would know of her misfortune; he would live with her there and be happy with her. But she refused to accept his generous offer, saying she would not make him unhappy. And then she loved, dreadful to say, for seven months – a young girl. Both of them were greatly attached to each other until the young girl finally turned from her and married. 'Form this time for ward,' says the poor hermaphrodite, 'I could no longer look at the girl; I hated her.' The most conflicting feelings always surge in her breast and torment her heart. She feels love for both sexes, and does not belong to either. 'What shall I do here on earth!' she exclaimed. 'What am I? In my life an object of scientific experiment, and after my death, an anatomical curiosity!' (487)

Artifact 5

The following excerpt is taken from a collection of lectures written by George Washington Burnap in 1854 concerning the duties and sphere of women. In this excerpt, Burnap explains how God's creation of man and woman as separate entities correlates with the existence of separate spheres for the two sexes. Also, the excerpt discusses the existence of a necessity of two distinct identities in society: "perfect humanity is made up of both the

sexes.” This idea demonstrates the nineteenth-century belief that two sexes were integral to the functioning of society. They believed that the mixing and blurring of gender lines would not only go against God’s creation but would also have negative consequences on society. Thus, this shows why people in the nineteenth century struggled with conceiving of an intersex identity that was not defined by the male/female binary.

But whatever may be the original equality of the sexes in intellect and capacity, it is evident that it was intended by God that that they should move in different spheres, and of course that their powers should be developed in different directions. They are created not to be alike but to be different. The Bible with a noble simplicity expresses in few words all that can be said upon this subject. “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him, male and female created he them.” As much as if the lawgiver of the Jews had said; “Perfect humanity is made up of both the sexes. One is not complete without the other. They are therefore counterparts of each other.” They must be different, and in many respects the opposites of each other, to fill their different spheres. This difference runs through the whole of their physical, moral, and intellectual constitution. This radical and universal difference points out distinctly a different sphere of action and duty. The God who made them knew the sphere in which each of them was designed to act, and he fitted them for it by their physical frames, by their intellectual susceptibilities, by their tastes and affections. (45-46)

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Kinderbrutanstalt and Kindchenschema: The Child Hatchery and the Psychology of Cute

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Traditionally, Brooklyn's Coney Island has been thought of as a family-oriented fun park featuring rollercoasters, sweets, and more. However, over the course of its history, Coney Island has been home to freak shows and human exhibits of all kinds. Historically, freak shows have displayed humans with disabilities for financial gain and nothing more. Today, these sort of freak shows are condemned by modern society. But what is to be made of a freak show display responsible for saving human lives? From 1903 until the late 1940s, Dr. Martin Couney exhibited premature infants in incubators and charged admission to gaze upon these so-called "incubator babies" (Brangham). The work that Martin Couney did with the incubator babies may have been questionable, but one cannot deny that several lives were saved in the process. Although it is true that "The Incubator Doctor" saved thousands of lives while his exhibit was at Coney Island, there are certain questionable elements present in the exhibition, such as using the psychology of cute to manipulate spectators and perpetuating the guilt of a society that exploits its young even to save their lives.

Abstract

Today, Coney Island is known for family fun and entertainment. But few people realize that at one time it was home to the first infant incubators in the nation. By examining the history of these incubators, putting children on display without their direct consent, and the psychology of cute, the authors delve into the darker side of Coney Island's history.

THE EXHIBIT IN CONTEXT

The year is 1903. Theodore Roosevelt is president, Henry Ford's automobile factory is well on its way, and escape artist Harry Houdini is

stunning crowds everywhere with his seemingly magical tricks. Meanwhile, Couney has just worked a little magic of his own by opening his exhibit displaying premature babies in Coney Island, New York (Brangham). In order to fund his research on the care of premature infants, Couney charged 25 cents per person to come and gaze upon the tiny babies in their astonishing glass incubators (Green). The exhibit stood alongside bars, racetracks, and seedy hotels in “The Gut,” which has been described as a “latter-day Sodom” (Stanton). Its tenure would span the course of forty years, witnessing impactful world events such as the sinking of the *Titanic*, Lindbergh’s flight across the Atlantic, and two World Wars.

It all began in the 1890s when Couney gained his medical degree in Leipzig, Germany. Then, he travelled to Paris in order to study under renowned physician Dr. Pierre Constant Budin, who helped to improve the primitive incubators being implemented at the time by adding an electric bell that would sound if the infant was in danger of overheating (Silverman). Couney took great interest in Budin’s achievements and was eager to be his pupil. In 1896, Budin charged Couney with the task of displaying the incubators at the World Exposition in Berlin. However, in order to do so successfully, they would need to present these new machines in action. The premature babies necessary for the exhibit were obtained from local Berlin’s Charity Hospital. Because they were so small and underdeveloped, these infants were thought to have little to no chance of survival. The display was dubbed “Kinderbrutanstalt,” or “Child Hatchery.” Berlin’s “Child Hatchery” was always crammed with onlookers, eager to see the tiny babies who had a chance to live because of the incubators (Silverman).

British event promoter Samuel Schenkein was amazed by the exhibit and invited Couney to recreate it at the Victorian Era Exhibition the following year; Couney agreed. In Berlin, the exhibit attracted crowds of people and was wildly popular. By 1898, the display had come to America at Nebraska’s Trans-Mississippi Exposition, a world’s fair whose intent was to show Western technological innovations. From 1900 until 1902, Couney continued to display the premature babies in incubators at various other expositions in order to demonstrate the new advancements in neonatology. Then, in 1903, amongst the carousels, restaurants, and hotels, the famous Coney Island exhibit debuted.

Shortly after this shift in venue, Couney married a nurse who was an

expert in premature infant care, Annabelle May, and had a premature baby daughter of his own, whom he named Hildegard. She was displayed with the other preemies at Coney Island for the first three months of her life, until she was well enough to live outside of the glass box. As an adult, she became a nurse and helped her father with his work. Over the years, the display had gone quite well and often boasted of its low infant mortality rates (Silverman). It seemed that newborns who had been denied a chance at life were finally going to live, thanks to this freakshow exhibit that doubled as a medical experiment¹. However, although numerous infant lives were saved by Dr. Couney's experiment, it cannot be ignored that human beings were put on display without their explicit consent. The juxtaposition of these two truths makes the case difficult to critique, especially when children instead of consenting adults become involved.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF CUTE

In any human exhibit, the showman capitalizes on some aspect of the individual's physicality or abilities in order to draw a crowd. For the incubator babies, it was their size that interested the public. Because premature infants are inherently smaller than the average human newborn, the subjects of this exhibit occupy the position of the freak due to a quality not normally codified as freakish: more than anything else, they were cute. It is important to examine this element of the exhibit because of the way that it capitalizes on an inherent human instinctual preference for the cute.

Before discussing the ways that cuteness pervades this exhibit, it is important to establish what this term entails. According to Lori Merish in her article "Cuteness and Commodity Aesthetics,"

[C]uteness is a highly conventionalized aesthetic, distinguishable both by its formal aesthetic features and the formalized emotional response it engenders. It is generally associated with the child... in terms of the formal property of smallness or 'miniatureness.' (187)

Merish goes on to describe various features that people usually associate with this type of aesthetic, such as round, thick limbs; large head-to-body ratio; and other features that are easily observable in the human infant.

In 1943, Austrian ethologist Konrad Lorenz introduced the term "Kindchenschema," or "baby schema," to talk about the specific set of

¹ For more history on Couney, his Coney Island exhibit, and the history of the incubator, see Baker 654-662

features that create a positive emotional response in human beings. According to Lorenz, these features were almost entirely within the realm of infantile characteristics, such as a large head, high and protruding forehead, large eyes, chubby cheeks, small nose and mouth, short and thick extremities, and plump body shape. Together, these features cause people to experience feelings of affection and a desire for caregiving (Glocker et al. 257). These findings have been verified by several studies, which reveal that “the baby schema affects cuteness perception and motivation for caretaking in adults, also suggesting a neurophysiologic mechanism by which baby schema could promote human nurturing behavior” (Borgi et al. 8).

Inherent in the term “baby” schema is the relation of this theory to this exhibit: because the objects of exhibition were all infants in this situation, they all occupied the position of the cute. The fact that they were premature only adds to this factor: even though they would not have had the chubby cheeks or the plump and thick body parts, they would have been even smaller than usual with an even more extreme head-to-body ratio. In fact, a premature infant resource site, “Perfectly Preemie,” lists four different categories for classifying baby size: micro (1-2.5lbs, 11-15”), tiny (2-4lbs, 14.5-16.5”), preemie (3-6lbs, 15-18.5”), and newborn (5-8lbs, 17.5-21”). While these distinctions are not medically relevant, they serve to provide a visual for the wide range of sizes infants can be and still be viable. Even though a premature infant as small as one pound would not have likely been viable at the time of this particular exhibit, the fact that a baby can be so small and survive demonstrates the extreme nature of the cuteness factor at work. This would have made them seem both adorable and unusual since, aside from medical professionals, this would have been the first time most members of the public saw a preemie. Additionally, as demonstrated in Appendix B, the babies were portrayed in such a way as to exaggerate their diminutive size, thus increasing the cute factor based on their position as miniatures—not only miniature humans, but also miniature when compared to other newborns who came to full term.

In addition to being a factor of nature, the cute is inherently reflective of the culture in which it is being perceived. This exhibit demonstrates this connection by the way that it focused on the salvation—and exhibition—of white infants over those of other races. Evident in Appendix B is a more subtle aspect of the way that the Incubator Institute pulled on the cuteness

thread within the minds of those who attended: based on all photographic evidence, the infants exhibited were all Caucasian. According to Merish, race plays an important part in the way that people perceive the cute because “appreciating the cute—loving the ‘adorable’ as culturally defined—entails a structure of identification, wanting to be *like* the cute—or, more exactly, wanting the cute to be just like the self” (186). By including only white babies, Couney not only created an element of exclusion to those infants benefited by this medical advancement, but he also excluded non-whites from his target audience. This exclusion implicitly presents whiteness as a culturally desired and valued trait for the infants because it is only by their membership in this segment of the population that they merited consideration and acceptance into this life-saving experience. Additionally, because there would have been a racial divide between individuals of any other race than those babies, they would not have been drawn to it to the same degree. Thus, Couney others all but the white consumer from his exhibit by presenting subjects who can only be linked to the self if the self happens to be white too. This also plays into the potential racism in the audience since the majority would have likely rejected the exhibit if it had contained minority babies.

Even though this kind of exclusion limited his target audience, the individuals included in this population were still in the majority, so the exhibit still saw a phenomenal amount of foot traffic. The way that the exhibit pulls on various aspects of the human psyche explains the reason why so many people attended this exhibit and why it was so long-lasting. Additionally, the feelings of wanting to care for the cute that these researchers describe would have only been intensified by the pitiable state of these individuals in particular: these incubator babies were tiny, vulnerable, and teetering on the liminal space between life and death. Even though the incubators in which they were placed were providing for the role of medical caregiver, they would nonetheless emotionally affect the people who viewed them because of their cuteness registers.

As the patrons looked at the babies in these mechanical caregivers, the gaze merits consideration. In terms of this gaze, using infants in an exhibit context makes sense due to the fact that “adults tend to look longer at infant than at adult faces and at cuter than at less cute infants” (Borgie et al. 2). This could be a result of the fact that the face of a human child is

more biologically relevant to the brain's attention system, as discussed in "That Baby Caught My Eye... Attention Capture by Infant Faces" by Tobias Brosch, David Sander, and Klaus R. Scherer of the University of Geneva. In their study, they found that just as threat-related stimuli registers faster, so too does "all classes of stimuli that have high biological significance" and that "[n]ewborns are a prototypical example of a highly biologically relevant stimulus for members of a species" (685). In other words, one of the reasons adults are drawn to the young of their same species has its roots in biology and survival instincts.

The fact that adults usually gaze upon the faces of babies for longer than any other kind of face, coupled with this inherent biological significance, increases the impact potential for this kind of exhibit. According to Borgi et. al.,

[t]he concept of cuteness not only encompasses the evaluation of specific morphological traits (i.e., cuteness ratings, preference, attractiveness), but also involves a positive/affectionate behavior response (cute response), which appears to be anticipated by a visual prioritization of—and an intentional bias to—infantile stimuli. (9)

Because the subjects of this particular exhibit were all infants themselves, Couney capitalized on this visual prioritization. According to Merish, the cuteness of an infant "*demand*s a maternal response and interpellates its viewers/consumers as 'maternal'" (186).

Even though the majority of people who attended the exhibit would not have had familial ties to the babies in the incubators, the cuteness/caregiving response would still have been intense because these instincts transcend blood ties. According to a study performed by Glocker et. al., which provided "the first experimental proof that baby schema in infant faces is perceived as cute and induces motivation for caretaking in adults," these features "motivate caretaking behaviors towards any infant, from any potential caregiver in a group, regardless of kinship" (262). This study explains why people still experience maternal/paternal responses to babies, regardless of whether they know the child personally, and, by extension, explains why these incubator babies were so appealing to the general public.

Additionally, within a discussion about the lack of familial ties the subjects would have had with their patrons, it is important to note the

way that these babies are displayed as distinctly removed from their parents. According to Merish, “the cute always in some sense designates a commodity in search of its mother, and is constructed to generate maternal desire; the consumer (or potential consumer) of the cute is expected... to pretend she or he is the cute’s mother” (186). This type of evaluation of the cute factor is extremely relevant to a discussion of this exhibit because there was an admission fee, so the patrons of the incubator babies occupy the position as consumer of the babies as commodities; in other words, Couney was selling their cuteness for a profit. This situation points to the way that the powerless, cute subject is vulnerable to exploitation since

cuteness enacts the fundamental ambivalence of the child in a liberal-capitalist order: as at once consenting ‘subject,’ and property ‘object.’ Evoking an ideal of maternal or benevolent ownership, cuteness stages a problematic of identification that centers on the child’s body. (Merish 187)

In this way, even though it may have seemed to be for humanitarian purposes, by creating a power dynamic of consumer-commodity, this exhibit is exploiting the cute in a very freakshow-esque manner. Although it is unclear how much of the money the exhibit earned went back into the research and their care, this commodification points to a problematic aspect of the infants’ reality: in order to receive the medical care they required to survive, their parents had to allow them to be displayed. Even though they were too young to understand their situation—much less consent to it—they nonetheless were submitted to the eyes of society and occupied the position of a commodity in order to have that society fund their survival.

In addition to this commodification, displaying the babies sans parents pulls on a theme of displaying children as orphans in order to get a faux-familial reaction out of audience members. This theme is readily apparent within an examination of the popularity of the Shirley Temple films. In her article, Merish examines the fact that Temple was often portrayed as family-less because of the way this invites a type of parental voyeurism from audience members: “since within the film’s diegesis the space of the mother is empty, the viewer is invited to ‘occupy’ that space” (197). In the same way, adults attending the incubator baby exhibit see these babies in a much cuter, more appealing light because of the fact that they are visually parentless—the viewer’s desire to nurture and care for the infant

is heightened and so, too, is their desire to fill that parental void, even if only subconsciously because of the way that “[w]hat the cute stages is, in part, a need for adult care” (Merish 187); these babies were probably more in need of that care than any infant the audience had ever seen.

The fact that these babies are in need of care also places them in a nuanced position within the rhetoric of cute. When the patrons of this exhibit witness its subjects in the incubators, they are aware of the fact that Couney has rescued them, which fulfills what Merish calls “an erotics of maternal longing.” She states that having cuteness on display creates a situation where “‘exposure’ in the public sphere generates an appropriative desire to ‘rescue’ the cute object by resituating it within a properly loving and appreciative (i.e., affectionally normative) familial context” (188). Even though the people visiting these babies were not directly providing this family structure, the way that the gaze dynamic allows them the vicarious position of maternal figure helps them fulfill this desire for rescue. Adults looking at infants who are presented visually lacking parental figures would find themselves drawn to filling that void; even though this dynamic would only be on the subconscious level, it is nonetheless an integral factor in understanding this gaze. They can stare at these helpless infants with the knowledge that they supposedly already have been rescued by the caring, good-natured Couney, who was portrayed as a father/savior figure to the babies (see Appendix A). However, this prevented them from seeing this exhibit as the freak show that it was, playing into science’s history of walking the line between advancement for the betterment of human beings and exploitative exhibition for gratification and profit.

This liminal space between medical care and freakification of the human subjects is strikingly familiar when one considers another exhibit that was prominent during this time period: from the 1840s to the 1930s, the American entertainment and medical fields combined to give genesis to the anatomical museums. Like the child hatchery, these exhibits presented human subjects for display for a fee; however, these were more sinister because their subjects were all already dead. Michael Sappol, who critiques these exhibits in his article “‘Morbid Curiosity’: The Decline and Fall of the Popular Anatomical Museum,” observes that “[t]he museum claimed to serve the cause of moral reformation, but it really worked on base emotions and bodily appetites.” Similarly, the child hatchery utilized the “base emotions”

of maternal/paternal care and the “bodily appetites” of visual consumption of the cute to draw people into the exhibit.

This exhibit draws on a desire for the aesthetic of cuteness that was particularly culturally significant to the time period because of the way that the late nineteenth century introduced the “‘feminization’ of commercial amusements, especially vaudeville and, later, cinema,” observes Merish. She points to the way that forms of exhibition during this time faced alterations in order to cater to “a more ‘respectable’ and female clientele” as “the emergence of cuteness as a commercial style in the second half of the nineteenth century activated a structure of feminine spectatorship and identification and helped constitute a feminine consumer public” (Merish 195, 188). Indeed, this phenomenon was not limited to the incubator baby exhibit as other cultural events promoted the commercialization and adoration of the cute (see Appendix C). These kinds of cultural moves within the context of human exhibitions reveal that the culture of consumption was conducive to the creation and success of an exhibit built on traditionally feminine desires for nurturing and childcare.

Based on several psychological studies, “women tend to be more interested in infants and caretaking activities than men” due to women’s cultural roles (Glocker et al. 258). This could possibly explain why women in particular would have been more interested in this exhibit and why Couney utilized women nurses within the exhibit to not only care for his subjects but also to participate in the display. While demographic information about the exact ratio of women to men who participated in this exhibit is yet to be discovered, one can postulate based on this kind of cultural and psychological information that the majority of them would have been female.

Even though this kind of all-infant display is unique, the world of the freak show is no stranger to exhibiting people because of their size. Indeed, some of the most famous “freaks” were put on display due to being larger, smaller, taller, or shorter than the average person. One of the more prominent examples of the cute factor specifically playing into freak shows is with the exhibition of individuals of short stature. Famous little people include Charles Sherwood Stratton, stage name “General Tom Thumb,” and his wife, Lavinia Warren.

The cuteness factor creates a distinction between little people and

others who were exhibited as “human oddities” because “[a]lthough they, like all ‘freaks,’ were known as ‘curiosities,’ the curiosity engendered by midgets was tempered by sympathy” (Merish 192). According to Merish, this type of sentimental gaze creates a situation where “the powerless were sympathized with and pitied.... Because of its association with childhood, cuteness always to some extent anesthetizes powerlessness” (191, 187). Similarly, the way that people looked at the incubator babies would have also held this element of sympathy, especially with parents who would have logically thought about what it would have been like if one of their children had faced this tenuous fate. There are very few individuals who hold a position as powerless as that of an infant, much less one born prematurely. Thus, although Merish does not make this connection to the child hatchery herself, her analysis of the cuteness factor is even more applicable when discussing exhibits like Couney’s.

While freaks in this category are often likened to infants, this exhibit goes straight to the source of this type of freakification by focusing on freakifying the infants themselves. Thus, even though the infants are not freaks in the conventional sense of the word, they nonetheless are occupying that cultural position, something that Merish would not find surprising as she observes that “cuteness is... intimately bound up with the history of the ‘freak.’ There are obvious parallels between child and freak: both are liminal figures, residing on the boundaries that separate the ‘fully human’ from the ‘less-than-human’” (189).

A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF THE INCUBATOR INSTITUTE

Despite citing his accreditations wherever possible and claiming that this was his moral duty (see Appendix A), Couney was exploiting these children’s cuteness for the purpose of medical fundraising. Although Couney insisted that displaying the babies and advertising his Coney Island establishment was “extremely ethical” and that he was not a showman (Liebling), he used a variety of persuasive strategies often employed by human exhibits of the time until the day the exhibit closed in the 1940s. Despite this, only a small number of critics (modern-day and from the early twentieth century) have spoken out against his practices.

One of the first-known published criticisms came from an 1898 editorial in *The Lancet*. The author wrote, “[The exhibit] attracted the

attention and cupidity of public showmen. . . who had no knowledge of the intricate scientific problem involved, [and] started to organise [*sic*] baby incubator shows just as they might have exhibited marionettes, fat women, or any sort of catch-penny monstrosity” (Silverman). In the twenty-first century, a set of scholars and medical practitioners, Mazurak and Czyżewska, refer to Couney’s exhibit as “mixed with an experimental method of treatment that eventually became a universally accepted method of the neonatal care” (316), which demonstrates that Couney’s efforts to save these children have since gone on to save others in the generations to follow. However, none of these critics have broken down the exhibit and examined the persuasive elements of Couney’s exhibit. Among them, freak show staples such as carnival barkers, banners, and visual trickery were used to appeal to an audience’s attraction to the “cute.”

The Coney Island boardwalk in those days had a wide variety of human exhibits which audiences paid to see. In order to stand out from the competition, carnival barkers (often referred to as “talkers” or “outside lecturers”) were hired by freakshow owners to sell tickets to curious passersby (Bogdan 27). As a medical practitioner, Couney had the space and equipment so his patients could live and grow inside the incubators. Unfortunately for him, his role as a doctor-turned-salesman required him to attract an audience that would pay to keep the machines running to keep the babies alive.

Thus, Couney hired a barker for the season and placed signs and banners outside the main structure, using language designed to target the audience’s emotions. These barkers would cry out messages such as “Don’t pass the babies by,” while a sign at the entrance read, “All the World Loves a Baby” (Silverman). Apart from the barker and signs, emotional appeals were also a staple in human exhibits when the owners did not wish to be identified as such. Instead, Couney must have wanted his incubator baby show to be deemed “morally uplifting and educational, not merely as frivolous amusement” (Bogdan 27). Here, the phrase “Don’t pass the babies by” implies the following: that one cannot possibly pass the incubator babies or they might die.

In addition to the show’s language, Couney’s nurses were told to bulk up if they were to keep their jobs. They were ordered to “add more clothes as the babies grew larger to heighten the illusion of smallness of each of

the infants on display,” and former exhibit nurse Madame Recht wore an oversized diamond ring on her finger; she slipped this huge “sparkler” over the babies’ wrists periodically to demonstrate how tiny the hands were (Silverman). Although it would not seem like a persuasive rhetorical move, this is also a strategy commonplace in the freak show. For instance, fat people in freak shows could often be found wearing clothes that exaggerated their size or appeared with props that made them appear larger. In other instances, fat people were often displayed with or married to “living skeletons,” or those who have muscle atrophy diseases. In this instance, it is true that the nurses and not the babies whose bodies are being modified. However, the juxtaposition of tiny against the large is still present.

It is clear that Couney had faith in his exhibit due to the fact that he chose to display his own premature daughter, Hildegarde. Others also believe that Couney’s exhibit was successful due to the many fragile infant lives that he managed to save. Lucille Horn, one of the premature newborns displayed at Coney Island, speaks positively about Couney’s experiment. She was born in 1920 along with a twin who died at birth. The hospital where she was born told her father that there was little they could do for the newborn baby girl, who weighed little more than two pounds (Green). Lucky for Lucille, her father refused to accept the hospital’s answer. Aware of the incubator babies on Coney Island, Lucille’s father wrapped her in a blanket, hailed a cab, and took her to see Martin Couney. He accepted the little girl and displayed her in the incubator along with the other premature babies. When asked how she felt about people paying to see her, Lucille replied, “It’s strange, but as long as they saw me and I was alive, it was all right. I think it was definitely more of a freak show. Something that they ordinarily did not see” (Green). Lucille is correct—at the time, the thought of seeing premature newborns in glass boxes was something out of a science fiction film. Although incubators are commonplace items in neonatal units today, at one time they were so out of the ordinary that they were featured in a sideshow attraction near the four-legged woman and the sword swallows (Brangham).

MODERN CONNECTION: TELETHONS AND EXPLOITATION

While today people cannot go to gawk at preemies in incubators at Coney Island, there are still many modern forms of entertainment

that demonstrate that these tendencies were not left behind in the early-twentieth century. One of these modern examples is the telethon, that is a TV show which seeks to acquire funds from donors based on a live show, often featuring individuals personally impacted by the issue at hand. Some of the most well-known telethons are the PBS pledge week and Britain's Comic Relief and Children in Need. The most famous telethon, though, is Jerry Lewis's Muscular Dystrophy telethon.

Many are familiar with the annual telethon that entertainer Jerry Lewis hosted in order to raise funds for those with muscular dystrophy, often abbreviated to "MD." While the Jerry Lewis Muscular Dystrophy Telethons were successful in raising millions of dollars for the families affected by this disease, they were also subject to criticism from disability rights organizations. The main criticism was that the telethons were demeaning because they "infantilized the disabled public, and made them appear intrinsically dependent on ablebodied [*sic*] society" (Smith 688). In other words, the telethons made it appear that the disabled were incapable of helping themselves—if the able bodied would not help them, then no one would.

The children sponsored on the telethon were known as "Jerry's Kids," furthering the stigma that people with disabilities are not capable of taking care of themselves. By using the term, "Jerry's Kids," the telethon inadvertently depicts Lewis as a paternal figure whose duty it is to look after these seemingly helpless children. While the intention was to raise funds for those afflicted with MD, it does not change the fact that images of "Jerry's Kids" were being used. While it is true that the money went to the benefit of the patients themselves, they were forced to demean themselves before society would donate the money for a cure. In his article, "Please Call Now, Before It's Too Late': Spectacle Discourse in the Jerry Lewis Muscular Dystrophy Telethon," Christopher R. Smith compares Jerry Lewis's telethon to the historical freak show. He states that "both events attempt to generate capital via the exhibition of different bodies" (Smith). More than likely, Smith would also place Couney's exhibits in this category. While it is true that admission charged to see the newborns was used for their care, it does not change the fact that people were willing to pay money to gaze upon medical curiosities, just like in the telethons. Spectators of both events had no problem with paying to stare because they felt like they were helping. It

is arguable to say that voyeurism is acceptable, as long as it is paid for. This says a great deal about a culture that demands a spectacle before it will help a fellow human being in need.

CONCLUSION

Although Martin Couney's incubators appeared to be nothing short of innovative and spectacular, when viewed through a critical lens, it is easy to take issue with the way they were funded. By having humans on display and charging admission for the public to come and see, Couney was recreating a freak show comparable to those of the early twentieth century. But how could the spectators resist? The psychology of cute dictates that the audience members would feel obligated to help these seemingly helpless creatures and would feel an intense desire to see them with their own eyes. Audience members may have thought that they were helping by paying the admission fee, and Couney could indeed have been genuine in his desires to aid these babies beyond hope, but they were participating in the display of human beings nonetheless.

PRIMARY SOURCES

Appendix A:

Article/Profile: "A Patron of the Preemies." *The New Yorker*. June 3, 1939

One profile for *The New Yorker*, in particular, demonstrates how the doctor's role in saving these babies' lives blurred the lines between medical professional and showman. Dr. Couney was interviewed many times about the exhibit at Luna Park in the years before his death. Staff reporter A.J. Liebling goes to great lengths to portray the doctor as a man of good ethos who would never exploit children:

"The Doctor has no financial backer; the \$35,000 building at Flushing was, he says, a considerable strain on his resources. Other long-time residents of Coney Island rate him 'a solid man' (3). Here, he comes across to the casual 1930s reader as a father-figure—even savior—to his charges. Rather than a hard-hitting journalistic piece, the profile asks Dr. Couney to talk about his former charges:

Responsibility for the existence of so many additional human beings might crush a misanthrope, but the Doctor bears the burden lightly. “They are good, normal, respectable people, all of them, I bet,” he says with conviction. “I get letters every year from people who their parents told them they were raised in my incubators. I never yet got a letter from a jail.” (3)

This passage indicates that Couney is encouraging the public to come invest in these children’s futures because these babies are guaranteed to grow up to be upright citizens who are bound to contribute to society.

Of course, saving human lives is not nefarious by itself. However, what is ethically ambiguous is the manner in which Dr. Couney, a medical professional, used methods of advertising and showmanship commonplace in human exhibits at the time to persuade visitors to offer more money by using emotionally persuasive techniques.

Appendix B:

Photograph Collection: “Infant Incubator - Hildegarde Couney With Other Nurses Holding Three Sets of Twins” New York World’s Fair Collection (1939-1940)

Thousands of photographs were taken at the 1939 New York World’s Fair, including several of premature babies from Couney’s Luna Park exhibit at Coney Island. This photograph depicts Couney’s daughter, Hildegarde (a former preemie herself) and another nurse holding up four babies to the camera. As the authors discuss in this paper, Couney’s nurses were expected to wear certain uniforms and jewelry which would exaggerate the size of their own features in juxtaposition with the babies’. The nurses also frequently held their tiny charges rather than having them remain in the incubators. As this photo demonstrates, the babies—although indeed small—were being depicted as smaller than they truly were.

Appendix C:

News article: “Baby Show Draws 200,000 to Coney: 500 Infants Entered, 250 Prizes Awarded— Girl Is Adjudged the Most Beautiful. 500,000 Attend at Night Resort Crowded With Visitors. Who Make Merry Till Dawn, When Carnival Closes.” *New York Times*. 21 Sep 1924: 23

This excerpt from a 1924 *The New York Times* article is another example of how people from late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries valued a baby's cuteness factor. In this article, thousands flocked to Coney Island to see babies who were not even members of Dr. Couney's exhibit. Several of the

"The annual baby show was a feature of Coney Island's Mardi Gras yesterday afternoon, and a crowd of 200,000 visitors cheered the baby parade. About 230 prizes and blue ribbons were awarded for various qualities in babies. Last night the crowd passed up to the half million mark in numbers and the resort was swamped with merrymakers . . . Of the 500 infants entered in the baby show, a 7-month-old child, Dorothy Bonadonna, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Bonadonna of 255 Sumpter Street, Brooklyn, was adjudged the prettiest, and received the William Randolph Hearst gold cup . . . The most original costume was adjudged to be that worn by Myrtle Lightell, aged 7 of 103 131st Street, Richmond Hill. LI., who was attired as a bride" (23).

five hundred babies entered into the contest by their parents walked away with prizes with titles such as "Most Beautiful." This indicates that society's fascination with Couney's preemies was not its own phenomenon. Many little children throughout the years— entered in these baby shows—were freakified because of their cuteness and were deemed cuter than others

"Man-made machines have again triumphed over the seemingly unconquerable forces of Nature with the invention of the mechanical mother. . . Before Dr. Couney's humanitarian and life-saving machine was perfected to the advance [*sic*] state in which one now finds it, the word 'incubator' was generally associated with the raising of chicks. A visit to his Incubator Institute, either at Coney Island boardwalk or the Atlantic City boardwalk, will reveal the precious invention of Dr. Couney in operation. So indispensable are these mechanical mothers to prematurely born babies that life would vanish instantly from their bodies without them. Nothing else in the world of science or nature could save them."

in the process. Such contests still exist today.

Appendix D:
"Mechanical Mother'
Saves Lives of Infants."
Modern Mechanix.
March 1931

This final primary source is a 1931 article from the newsletter, *Modern Mechanix*. This source is particularly

significant because many of the publications about incubator babies at the time were news pieces about particular events that took place at Luna Park or about Couney himself. Even though *Modern Mechanix* was a publication distributed with scientific intentions, it still portrays Couney and his modified incubator as a nurturing mother substitute. It reflects several attitudes from the time period: that Couney's medical expertise and raising money to fund these machines (and scientific discovery in the process) was absolutely necessary for the survival of premature children.

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Gender Performance: From the Freak Show to Modern Drag

- Olivia Germann, *Ball State University*

It is the season six finale of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, and the top three queens are waiting to see who will be crowned America's Next Drag Superstar. The finalists' bodies exceed our almost unattainable beauty standards, and their hair seems to defy gravity. Courtney Act, one of the finalists, is a singer from Australia; her normally blonde wig has been replaced with a bright pink one, and she's wearing a technicolor dress that looks like something out of a Bowie video. Next to her is Adore Delano, another singer, whose fire red wig hangs down to her ample bosom (thanks to a chest plate), while her black gown screams of sequins. And on the very end is Bianca Del Rio, a comedian queen who specializes in insult comedy and more traditional drag, wearing one of her typical wigs: large, black, and topped with a huge spray of colored fabric. Her eyes are made up in her typical fashion, with copious amounts of white eyeliner to feminize her eyes and make them pop. The queens entertain the audience with an opening number, the whole time "serving" face, body, and total drag realness as they try to convince Ru that they deserve the crown. In the end, it goes to Bianca Del Rio; as the crowd's deafening roars fill the award hall, the crown is placed on her head ("The Finale").

Abstract

This paper explores how gender performance in the freak show grew into the modern drag scene as we know it today. By examining some of the modern elements of drag, it is possible to see how these performers circumvented the laws, prejudices, and discrimination aimed towards them to create a booming industry where drag queens appear on national television and are treated with the respect that they had previously been denied.

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, drag or being in drag is defined as "clothing more conventionally worn by the opposite sex, especially women's clothes worn by a man" ("Drag"). While drag has a long history that can be traced back to ancient civilizations, in America drag really got its start in the freak show. In the American freak shows of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, men would perform in

women's clothes to the accompaniment of jeers and laughter. Unlike drag today, which celebrates the men who wield gender as a form of costumed performance, the freak shows used drag as a way to separate the "normal" from the "abnormal" (Taylor, Rupp, Gamson 108). From the ashes of the traditional freak show arose the multi-billion dollar industry of modern American drag, replacing ragged performers with queens. Reclaiming the glory and respect that was denied to the drag queens of the freak show, the modern drag scene is a pertinent example of the aftermath of the freak shows as well as a story of reclamation and family for those who partake in it.

Gender performance formed the basis for many popular attractions in the freak show, drawing crowds full of curiosity and searching for entertainment. While other attractions based on gender roles, such as bearded ladies, called up similar issues, drag was specifically defined as men dressing and performing as women. For freakshow audiences, drag was seen as a form of ritual humiliation (Sears 177). It was meant to be so outlandish that the audience could not contain their laughter. Thus, when men dressed as women, the audience responded as if it were a farce. The audience's reaction created a space where the challenging of gendered stereotypes was mocked, therefore reaffirming and solidifying the "acceptable" beliefs of the time.

But the real fascination with drag came from the strict crossdressing laws that swept the nation from 1848-1900. These laws banned people from appearing in public wearing clothes not associated with their "natural" sex. The purpose of these laws was to suppress non-normative behavior, but it had the opposite effect. As author Claire Sears points out:

such laws could also incite cultural fascination and the desire to see, which entrepreneurs could exploit. . . Another manifestation was the newspaper scandal, which splashed cross-dressing practices across the front page, as local editors ran sensational stories and interviews with those who broke the law. These scandals publicized normative gender boundaries and ridiculed transgressors, representing gender difference as a titillating private eccentricity or individual moral flaw. (177)

These laws started a conversation that was fueled by drag, a topic that previously was ignored and considered taboo. Drag performers and

other crossdressers finally had a voice. Even though the drag queens were not the only ones affected by these laws, Sears argues that “the starkest manifestation of this cultural fascination was the dime museum freak show, which displayed non-normative bodies and cross-gender performances in seeming conflict with the law” (Sears 177). But the freak show circumnavigated the law skillfully, taking advantage of a loophole in the law stating crossdressing was not allowed in public. As freak shows were held on private property, indoors, there was implicit consent in buying and attending the freak show (177). Drag then began its boom.

While these laws were meant to stamp out crossdressers and drag queens, this plan ultimately backfired. Yet, while this interest in drag may seem positive, drag queens still faced untold amounts of abuse, mockery, and violence due to the anti-crossdressing laws and the treatment that they faced in the freak shows. American freak shows were infamous for their terrible working conditions and pay. Not surprisingly, drag performers were also subjected to these conditions and often forced to live in squalor. According to scholar Heath Diehl, addictive substances were sometimes used as a way to keep performers effectively caught in the freak show. The owners were able to trap a performer in a low-paying contract by controlling their access to drugs and alcohol (31).

With the new anti-crossdressing laws in place, queens finally had audiences that filled tents and sold-out shows, making queens some of the most valuable performers in the show; but outside the tent, in the real world, they were considered public enemies. Police would arrest queens out in public and often turned a blind eye to the violence that was afflicted upon them (Sears 180). This behavior was nothing new to drag queens. Many associated drag with prostitution, filth, and rampant sexual behavior, which went against the dominant religious and moral views. The fear that drag would somehow infect people with immoral thoughts and behaviors or ruin the American lifestyle was prevalent.

But the discrimination lasted long past the freak shows and the crossdressing laws. Negative attitudes towards drag queens, who were mostly gay men, continued long after the crossdressing laws came and went. Drag queens were very visible performers who exemplified queerness and challenged the gender norms on which society was rooted, even after so much “progress.” Many queens tell stories upon stories of meeting

opponents of drag, whether they were morally opposed church groups, violent crowd members, or random perpetrators of violence (Sears 181). The AIDS crisis (which was originally called GRID, for gay related immune deficiency) had a hand in increasing the already excessive violence and hatred towards drag queens (Taylor, et al. 123). The “gay panic” that reigned from the 1980s through the early 2000s made drag appear dirty and diseased.

What is it about drag that creates such a strong backlash and incites such violence? And why does the majority of the violence and hate speech come from men? In a recent online study conducted by a group of researchers, it was found that men who agreed with hyper-masculine statements were more likely to have a negative attitude toward drag. What this suggests is that the uncomfortableness of being confronted with an alternate gender role makes men more likely to try to bolster their sense of masculinity, often resulting in bashing of the “feminine” men involved in drag. It is this fear of compromised manhood that seems to drive men to anger and hatred when confronted with drag, showing just how toxic hyper-masculinity can be (Bishop, et al. 557).

According to Judith Butler, gender is defined by “the extent that one is not the other gender, a formulation that presupposes and enforces the restriction of gender within that binary pair” (Butler 22). What drag does is confront the idea that manhood is defined by the absence of womanhood. Drag takes men and puts them in the costume of womanhood and femininity; this then confuses us as to where queens fit within the binary. Are they male because they are physically male? Are they female because they are in women’s clothes? Or are they now something else, something unnamed and unknown?

Butler also speaks about drag as questioning the idea of a “real” or “natural” gender identity. By existing in this gray area, drag confuses and seems to challenge the very gender binary that many people hold as an integral part of their identity. The violence, then, is an expression of the fear that a spectator’s identity might be in question, that if drag queens do not neatly fit into the gender binary, then maybe spectators do not either (Bishop et al. 557). When queens get up on stage and complicate the gender binary, even though the audience is not actively partaking in the complication themselves, they are ultimately implicated and forced to

acknowledge and think about the confusion and how it could or could not apply to them.

This fear was clearly echoed around the country in the form of the anti-crossdressing laws and still affects attitudes towards drag queens today. But now with the success of mainstream television shows like *RuPaul's Drag Race* and the more accepting attitudes of the “millennial” generation, drag in America finally exists as a full-fledged art form that is beloved and widely accepted. While there may always be push-back against drag for religious reasons, homophobic reasons, and other factors, we are now entering a golden age of drag.

Drag today is an example of a group of people who were discriminated against and taken advantage of but who then turned the avenue of their suffering into stunning performance art. They are clearly visible, adopting names that emphasize gender and sexuality, such as “Detox Icunt” and “Alaska Thunderfuck 5000,” while sporting wigs and fantastic costumes that rival anything on the runways of Paris. Although there are many different facets of drag and an incredibly diverse array of talents, there are some aspects of drag performance that still harken back to the days of the freak show. For example, performers have taken the words used to belittle and humiliate them and turned them into a part of the drag vocabulary. According to Stephen Mann, the language of drag queens is made up of the stereotypical insults the performers hear on a daily basis.

Words such as “ladyboy,” “pussy,” “sissy,” and “faggot” have been reclaimed by the drag community. These words are now anthems, and the queens embrace them with pride where there once was shame (Mann). The term “queen” itself is one of these reclaimed words, one that was a derogatory slur towards gay men (LGBT News) but now is an identifier. Another term that the community has reclaimed, harkening directly back to their history in the freak show, is the word “freak” itself. The word “freak” has been applied negatively to drag queens since the beginning; it is meant to be a derogatory and humiliating insult. But what these queens have done is embrace it and claim it as a moniker of positivity and great ability. It is frequently used to describe a performer that is exemplary, and the title is considered a high honor (“Definition of Freak”).

Of course the mother of drag queens, RuPaul, is a shining example of reclaiming language, especially in her wildly popular music video from

2014, “Sissy That Walk.” In the title alone, Ru tackles reclaimed language, and flaunts such terms throughout the song. Some examples include: “[a]in’t no T, ain’t no Shade,” “I’m a femme queen,” and “my pussy game is on fire” (RuPaul). This video is an internet sensation with over five million views. The video was created on *RuPaul’s Drag Race* season six and became an anthem for drag queens everywhere.

Along with reclaimed language, there is also an original drag vocabulary used by queens. It varies by region but has a core vocabulary and stylization that is found nationwide, tying queens of different walks of life together. Much like Ebonics functions as a means of subcultural communication in urban black communities, this created language binds queens together (Mann 797). Looking at *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, many people scratch their heads at the frequent use of the terms “girl” and “mamma,” in addition to the liberal use of well-known drag phrases such as “no T no shade,” which means that a queen is telling the “T” (or truth) straight up. Or “beating my face,” which refers to how heavily drag queens apply their makeup. Within the community, these terms create a sense of belonging and a common language, a way to mark oneself as a drag queen. RuPaul, as the originator of many of these terms, not only celebrates this language but also works them into the competition on *RuPaul’s Drag Race*.

On the show, Ru always says that the four talents needed to be America’s next drag superstar are charisma, uniqueness, nerve, and talent. According to scholar Nathaniel Simmons, these factors (abbreviated as CUNT, a joke that never gets old on the show) also include nailing the speech and language of drag. And that, along with the CUNT factors, are what make a true winner, or ideal drag queen. Focusing specifically on season four of *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, Simmons says,

Throughout RPDR Season four, contestants’ talk revealed appropriate patterns of behavior which are acceptable and unacceptable for ANDS (America’s Next Drag Superstar). These culturally specific codes revealed not only what is appropriate for the winner of RPDR, but also what it means to speak, and act, like a drag queen. (Simmons 635-636)

Not only is this reclaimed language a way to find common ground, but it is deemed a necessary part of participation in the drag community for all queens.

Language is only part of someone's identity as a drag queen. Returning back to our working definition of drag, which is wearing "clothing more conventionally worn by the opposite sex, especially women's clothes worn by a man" ("Drag"), the biggest aspect of drag is the look of it, especially since it is primarily a visual art. While there are many different types of queens with different styles, subtlety is not in any drag queen's vocabulary. From plus-sized queens, pageant queens, comedy queens, fishy queens, and butch queens to all the other personas and aesthetics employed, drag is "screaming vulgarity" (63), as Daniel Harris puts it. While some queens, such as Courtney Act, have made their careers on their more "natural" drag looks, much of drag is more concerned with highlighting the illusion of femininity in the extreme. Queens pad and cinch their bodies in order to create the ideal feminine shape, tuck their genitalia tightly so no bulges can be seen, and don incredibly realistic breast plates and other breast substitutes.

Makeup is also a part of the illusion, one that comes with specific expectations. Drag queen Alaska Thunderfuck 5000 famously said in her song "Nails," "If you're not wearing nails, you're not doing drag!" (Thunderfuck) Queens are expected to enter fully into the illusion in order to do "proper drag," which includes nails, wigs, fake lashes, and pounds upon pounds of makeup. The goal of drag is not to appear like a "real" woman but rather to inflate femininity far beyond what we conceive as normal. This is the power of theatre at work, twisting the perspective of our "normal" world. In the words of scholars Verta Taylor, Leila J. Rupp, and Joshua Gamson, drag is "performing protest" (105) by engaging specifically in "contestation, intentionality, and collective identity." (105) When queens get up on stage, it may not seem inherently obvious since the performance is so fantastic and over the top, but, by refusing to be demure and quiet, their performance serves as a rallying cry, queens will not let you ignore them and their dresses.

Yet, the idea that drag is about men "passing" as women is a toxic one. In fact, in July of 2015, the popular gay pride parade in Glasgow—Free Pride Glasgow—banned drag queens from participating, claiming not only that drag was offensive to transwomen but that the concept of drag itself holds up strict ideals of femininity and reaffirms the age-old belief that it is only a woman's job to be pretty (Gremore). While this angle on drag can

certainly bring up some valid points, especially since it is an art obsessed with and focused on beauty, it is an oversimplification. Beauty is a concept that we as humans have been obsessed with in multiple forms, from fashion to sculpture, and drag is a modern art form expressing new ideals of beauty while breaking open perceived gender barriers.

The idea that drag is offensive to transwomen exposes again how much backlash drag performers receive from people perceived to be part of their “community.” Mann brings up the point that drag queens are aware of their status as men and are consciously pushing against it as a means of satire and humor; this is completely different from being a transwoman, which is a matter of being rather than choice. Drag queens choose to be drag queens, and, while some drag queens, like Carmen Carrera and Kenya Michaels, have come out as trans, drag does not disqualify the existence of transpeople; rather, drag queens offer their voices and support for those fighting against gender stereotypes for men, women, non-binary, and transpeople everywhere. Drag scholar Daniel Harris tackles the argument between drag queens and the trans community in his article, “The Aesthetic of Drag,” by saying,

While many people believe that the primary purpose of drag is to enable men to ‘pass’ as women, verisimilitude has never been the guiding aesthetic principle at work when gay men dress up as bearded nuns on roller skates, topless baton twirlers with rhinestone pasties, or whorish prom queens” (62)

Again, this scholar emphasizes that drag is not concerned with passing but rather with performance, making the line between being a transperson and a drag queen very clear.

The community aspect of drag is just as important as the art form itself. Because drag often attracts gay performers, it serves as a haven of support and expression for people that have often been rejected by their families or ostracized by their communities. This connects back to the freakshow roots of drag, as the freak show also provided a form of family to performers when they had none. One way drag creates community is through the time honored tradition of drag families. When entering into drag and joining the community, an older queen who has been in the business takes the new queen under their wing and becomes their “drag mom.” This queen then helps them navigate the world of drag and helps

introduce the queen to other queens to broaden their own family (for more information on drag families, I recommend looking at the piece “Drag Orphan” by Tom Bartolomei). A notable example is famous drag queen Alyssa Edwards and her drag daughter, LaGanja Estranja, both of who appeared on *RuPaul’s Drag Race*. By forming these families, queens make their community their home. Many queens have been kicked out of their homes, rejected by their families, and suddenly thrown into a world that is both exciting and frightening. These drag families take new queens in and train them, so that, when they retire, their drag daughters are ready to become drag mothers themselves and continue the cycle of love and support.

Uniting sexuality and theatre, drag queens are the phoenixes that have risen from the ashes. From a long history of suffering comes this bright age where drag performance is prominently featured as a viable and respectable form of both entertainment and performance. While the ties to the freak show can still be seen in multiple aspects of the drag community, it is now a form of art that helps include members of society who have often been shunned. Just as the freak show functioned as a safe place for those unwanted by the world, drag works as a modern haven and land of honey for those who dare to live and perform outside the norms of gender and sexuality.

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Normal versus Freak: The Issue of Staring in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and Classic American Freak Show

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The term “freak show” paints a variety of images on the canvas of the reader’s mind. One may think of anything from fat ladies and strong men to “giants” and “dwarves.” While these performers were certainly stock characters of the historical freak show, they barely scratch the surface of the variety of entertainers featured. According to scholar Robert Bogdan, the classic American freak show was at its height from 1840 until 1940 (23). During this hundred year span, humans who were considered outsiders from mainstream society were put on display to perform for the “normal” public, who in turn stared at these so-called “freaks” for entertainment purposes. Disability scholar Rosemarie Garland Thomson defines the dynamics of staring in the following passage: “Staring at disability choreographs a visual relation between a spectator and a spectacle” (56). From the moment when this “starer” versus “stared at” relationship is established, a line of othering has been drawn.

Abstract

Within the world of performance exists a line of othering. By juxtaposing the cult classic *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and the historical freak show, the issue of staring becomes more apparent.

Although the historical freak show is considered outdated by today’s standards, its influence can still be felt in modern culture, most prevalently in the entertainment industry where this line of othering still exists. In stage performances, it is generally understood that the actors perform and the audience watches. The actors exist in a totally different plane than the audience; they behave as if completely unaware of the existence of the audience, yet the audience is aware of the actors’ every movement. Through this feigned obliviousness, both the performers and spectators are forced

into a realm of othering. However, this is not always the case. During live performances of the cult classic *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, audience members are frequently encouraged to behave in ways that would be considered utterly offensive in the world of traditional theater. During *Rocky Horror* shadow cast screenings—screenings at which the actors act out the film while the movie plays behind them—spectators have been known to throw things, shout at the screen, and even join the actors on stage for the iconic song, “The Time Warp.”

In spite of all the crudity and lewdness, fans frequently flock to the famous midnight screenings of *Rocky Horror* to participate in the onstage zaniness and coarse merriment. During these screenings, it is common for participants to dress up like various characters from the film, especially if the film will feature a shadow cast. While the midnight screenings are not for everyone, the show’s interactive style creates a sense of unity between actor and audience that helps to bridge the othering gap characteristic of traditional live performances.

Juxtaposing elements of the historical freak show and the 1975 cult classic *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* reveals that, while it is clear that there is a line between the “spectator” who stares and the “spectacle” who is stared at (Thomson), where exactly the line is drawn varies. The historical freak show and *Rocky Horror* definitely feature many of the same elements, but, whereas people come to *Rocky Horror* to participate, express pride, and show support for the show itself, audience members that attended the historical freak show often went to make a mockery of the entertainers and feel a sense of entitlement.

In order to fully grasp the controversy surrounding *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, it is critical to provide a summary. The film begins with two of the main characters, newly engaged Brad Majors and Janet Weiss, who are driving home when their car breaks down in front of a strange castle located oddly in a rural community. Brad and Janet knock on the front door in search of a phone, and they are greeted by Riff Raff, the castle’s “handyman.” He informs the couple that they are just in time for a party thrown by the “Master.” The two protest, but Riff Raff and his sister, Magenta, sweep the pair into a wild and lavish party where the famous “Time Warp” scene plays out.

Shortly after, the lead character, Dr. Frank N. Furter, makes his debut.

Frank, a self-described “sweet transvestite from Transsexual, Transylvania” (*The Rocky Horror Picture Show*), announces that he has discovered the secret to life itself and invites everyone up to his secret laboratory to unveil it. The human creation is revealed to be a sexy, well-toned, blond man called Rocky. The group once again bursts out in celebration, but the festivities are soon interrupted by Eddie, the motorcycle riding ex-lover of both Frank and one of his associates, Columbia. Annoyed by the disturbance, Frank murders Eddie with a pickaxe and proceeds to sweep Rocky off for a night of pleasure. Brad and Janet are coerced into staying the night in the castle and are both individually seduced by Frank.

Meanwhile, Riff Raff tortures Rocky, prompting him to run and hide in terror. Following her sexual encounter with Frank, Janet stumbles across Rocky in hiding and in turn seduces him. While searching for Rocky, Frank is informed that an intruder has entered the castle, and it is none other than Dr. Scott, a former teacher of Brad and Janet’s and, conveniently, also Eddie’s uncle. Everyone discovers Rocky and Janet together, greatly upsetting both Brad and Frank. Magenta breaks the tension by announcing that dinner is served. Everyone sits down to an incredibly awkward dinner, and it soon becomes apparent they are eating Eddie’s corpse. Upon this realization, chaos ensues and sends Janet running, with Frank in pursuit.

After a chase, everyone ends up back in Frank’s lab, where he ensnares Janet, Brad, Rocky, Dr. Scott, and Columbia in his “Medusa Transducer,” a machine which freezes them in place. Frank dresses the frozen individuals in corsets, fishnets, boas, and stage makeup and unfreezes them before forcing them to perform an elaborate cabaret number. The performance comes to a halt as Riff Raff and Magenta reappear, revealing themselves and Frank to be aliens from the planet Transsexual in the galaxy Transylvania. The pair decides they have had enough of following Frank’s orders and proceed to kill him, Columbia, and Rocky. Riff Raff and Magenta release the others outside before beaming the castle back into outer space. The film concludes with the survivors crawling around in the dirt, trying to make sense of what has happened to them (*The Rocky Horror Picture Show*).

Mark Siegel, author of “*The Rocky Horror Picture Show: More Than a Lip Service*,” accurately describes the film as “a raunchy, vulgar, and jolting film about the coming to Earth of beings from the planet Transsexual in the galaxy of Transylvania” (305). Siegel’s description is more than correct;

the characters could be seen as incredibly selfish, sex-crazed, and unstable, particularly Frank, whose crowning achievement is his creation of the perfect human being purely for his own sexual gratification. However, this does not change the fact that the show and its characters are adored by fans everywhere. While enthusiasts of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* identify with the nonconformity, people who view themselves as “normal” would most likely deem the show to be ridiculous and offensive.

Christy Tyson comments on reasons that some may not find the show or its midnight performances so appealing: “Some find the music too loud, the people too freaky, the sexual innuendos too embarrassing” (60). While fans typically do not take issue with the show’s overtly sexual nature, others might be highly offended by the show as a whole and especially by Frank’s actions. When Frank visits both Brad and Janet individually in order to seduce them, both encounters take place behind a sheet so that only the silhouettes of the actors are visible. However, the audience is still very aware of what is happening behind the sheet, due to the visibility of the silhouettes performing dramatized sex acts (*The Rocky Horror Picture Show*). This is just one example of the sexual content in *Rocky Horror* that some viewers find objectionable.

One reason opponents of *Rocky Horror* feel entitled to judge the show is that they view themselves as “normal” as opposed to the onstage performers, whom they view as “freakish.” Whereas historical freak show performers were scorned for their atypical body types, *Rocky Horror*’s characters behave and dress in ways that are considered abnormal. The only reason that some individuals are freakified is that they do not fit into the mold that society has constructed for them. The title of scholar Robert Bogdan’s essay, “The Social Construction of ‘Freaks’” says it all: the term “freak” is a social construction (23).

“Freak” is a term invented to put people in a box. It may be only a word, but it has the power to further the gap between performer and spectator. Only “freaks” can perform in a freak show. Only “normal” people can watch. Bogdan puts it perfectly when he writes, “‘Freak’ is a frame of mind, a set of practices, a way of thinking about and presenting people; it is not a person but the enactment of a tradition, the performance or a stylized presentation” (35). Because these “abnormal” individuals do not fit in society’s mold, they are forced to create a new one for themselves. Some

are able to find comfort among others with unique characteristics, and some decide to profit from flaunting their deformities and “abnormalities.” Fans of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* may not necessarily profit from performing, but they also often find the show’s environment welcoming. At a midnight showing of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, costumes and unconventional behavior are not only accepted—they are encouraged. Existing outside society’s constructed mold is liberating for many.

It is clear people who are labeled strange or bizarre flock together; this is evident in both *Rocky Horror* and the classic freak show. The question is, why does this happen? In a 1980 issue of *The English Journal*, similar questions were posed to its readers: “What is the significance of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*? Why do kids keep going to it?” One reader, Christy Tyson, wrote in and claimed that the show’s popularity was due to the fact that it appealed to those who stood out to others. “It’s OK to be different,” she writes. “It’s no wonder that fans feel a special kinship, a commonality of beliefs and attitudes, intensified by the heavy group participation that is part of the *Rocky* experience” (60). Whereas performers were stared at during the historical freak shows for their abnormalities, no one is stared at during *Rocky Horror* because the show puts forward the idea that everyone is abnormal. No one goes to a *Rocky Horror* performance to judge others or to feel entitled; they go to be around others who are just as strange as they are and to feel unified with their fellow *Rocky Horror* aficionados.

John Boe, author of the review “Don’t Dream it, Be It,” would definitely agree with Tyson’s opinion. Boe writes that his daughter frequently performs in a *Rocky Horror* shadow cast as Dr. Frank N. Furter. After watching his daughter masquerade as the erotic drag queen on stage many times, Boe noticed common behavioral traits among the audience members. Many of the guests were frequent goers and came to see the show “with an almost religious devotion...every Saturday night, week after week, month after month, even year after year” (Boe 63). Such dedication is not indicative of a passing fancy. It has been 41 years since *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* debuted, and the midnight screenings are just as strong as they ever were. This strong dedication to the *Rocky Horror* lifestyle and frequent attendance of the midnight screenings is indicative of a cult following.

When a person hears the word “cult,” they may think of anything from satanic rituals and chicken blood to Charles Manson and his followers;

however, when discussing the term “cult” as it applies within the context of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and other pop culture films, it has an entirely different connotation. In their article, “Toward a Sociology of Cult Films: Reading *Rocky Horror*,” authors Patrick T. Kinkade and Michael A. Katovich explore cult attraction and its definition. According to the authors, “secular cults feature fanatic attachments to objects that stand outside a religious perspective; they thus re-portray historical ties between the sacred and secular in society” (191). People that become so caught up in the film version of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* are attracted to more than just the midnight screenings; they are drawn to the lifestyle it entails. Of course, choosing to be abnormal comes with great responsibility. While *Rocky Horror* is about celebrating sexuality and nontraditional lifestyles, it is not widely accepted by everyone.

Although it has a plethora of fans, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* also has its share of critics. People tend to stare at things that are out of their realm of comfort. Staring is at the very root of audience involvement in both freaks shows and *Rocky Horror*—although the dynamics of staring are different in each. In *Rocky Horror*, the “normal” becomes the object that is stared at. Within the film, Brad and Janet, the representatives of the norm, stare at other characters they view as peculiar, such as Frank, Riff Raff, Magenta, and Columbia. During one of the film’s most iconic songs, “The Time Warp,” Brad and Janet watch as Frank’s companions and various party guests dance about the mansion, but they do not participate themselves (*The Rocky Horror Picture Show*). Brad and Janet’s behavior is no different from the way in which people who consider themselves normal treat those they consider abnormal in real life. In “The Politics of Staring: Visual Rhetorics of Disability in Popular Photography,” Rosemarie Garland Thomson writes, “Starers gawk with abandon in at the prosthetic hook, the empty sleeve, the scarred flesh, the unfocused eye, the twitching limb, but seldom does looking broaden to envelop the whole body of the person with the disability” (57).

In *Rocky Horror*, this dynamic holds true; however, it is reversed. While Brad and Janet are staring at the “freaks” they have encountered in Frank’s mansion, the audience members, who are often dressed up like Frank and his merry group, are gawking and poking fun at Brad and Janet. While the duo might fit in within any “normal” setting, they stand out tremendously in

the *Rocky Horror* universe. Interestingly enough, several *Rocky Horror* goers do choose to dress up as Janet in her underwear. It is as if fans only see her as someone worth idolizing once she has assimilated to Frank's world and has also become a "freak" as it pertains to the context of the film. People do not typically enjoy standing out or being othered. As a result, it is easy for people to critique those who take part in any sort of othering.

Critics of the historical freak show often take issue with the fact that many entertainers willingly have chosen to perform. After carefully considering this issue, scholar David A. Gerber poses the question, "By what criteria can we judge that consent fictive or credible?" (Gerber 38). In his article, "The 'Careers' of People Exhibited in Freak Shows: The Problem of Volition and Valorization," Gerber describes an "ultra-obese individual," more commonly known as a "fat lady," who wears small, tight fitting clothing and sits in an atypically tiny chair to emphasize her weight (38-41). If she enjoys entertaining her audience, is it wrong for her to perform? This issue is complicated by the fact that, while contemporary performers have more freedom to consent and control over how they display their bodies, many historical performers did not. Oftentimes, freak show performers were forced to perform, even frequently bought and sold akin to livestock. It would seem that in a circumstance where an entertainer who had not expressed their full consent to perform, even if they enjoyed what they were doing, would be unacceptable. Staring without consent is a violation to one's very right to exist. In a different article penned by Gerber entitled, "Pornography or Entertainment? The Rise and Fall of the Freak Show," he references Otis Jordan, also known as "the Frogman" (20). According to Gerber, Jordan "argued that anti-freak show moralists were interfering with his right to make a decent, honest living" (20). Jordan saw it as his personal choice to emphasize his physical differences and profit from it. Although it is true that Jordan was a performer in the 1980s, after it was no longer legal to traffick humans, his options for earning a living were still incredibly limited because of his disability. Since *Rocky Horror* is a more contemporary show, the participants have more choice regarding how to represent themselves.

Since *Rocky Horror* is a more contemporary show, the performers have more choice in how they choose to represent themselves, audience members who choose to dress in drag included. Anyone who has seen *The*

Rocky Horror Picture Show knows Frank is a crossdresser. During his first onstage appearance shortly after the conclusion of “The Time Warp,” he appears dressed in a long, black cape, which he throws to the side revealing incredibly feminine lingerie complete with heels, fishnets, and even a pearl necklace. Even though he is lecherous and distasteful, audiences everywhere adore Frank and frequently attempt to mimic his wardrobe. Historically speaking, however, Frank’s apparel choices would have been considered nothing short of an abomination. Clare Sears addresses the crossdressing issue in her article, “Electric Brilliancy: Cross-Dressing Law and Freak Show Displays in Nineteenth-Century San Francisco,” which also discusses the oppression of the queer community in nineteenth-century America, primarily San Francisco. According to Sears’s research, twenty-one states passed laws forbidding public crossdressing over the span of fifty-two years between 1848 and 1900 (170). The San Francisco law in particular explicitly forbade public nudity, wearing clothes appropriate for the opposite sex, and indecent exposure. A violation of any of these resulted in arrest and a fine of up to five hundred dollars (Sears 171). To *Rocky Horror* fans, Frank is not a criminal; he is only looking to freely express himself and his sexuality. But, according to this law, in the nineteenth century, he would have been considered no better than a sex offender.

Frank’s lifestyle and choices might make certain people feel uncomfortable, but this does not make his behavior wrong. These rules Sears describes became a way to police people who did not wish to conform to mainstream society. *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* did not exist in this era, but, if it had, the unified diversity may have provided some comfort to these nonconformists. In addition to banning crossdressing, various cities, San Francisco included, enacted laws designed to ban “problem bodies” from the streets (Sears 174). Since these cities felt that the crossdressing law had been effective in cleaning up the “undesirables” from the public eye, new laws were put in place to control the “abnormal” and regulate their place in society. The main targets in these cases were primarily Chinese immigrants, prostitutes, and anyone who suffered from a visible physical disability (Sears 174). These human beings did not fit the perfect social mold, so the popular mindset was that they were to be eliminated. Many performers in the classic American freak show were merely human beings with disabilities who would definitely be targeted by these inhumane laws. The irony of the

situation is that the law allowed these citizens to exist peacefully in their own homes—as long as they stayed there. In fact, Sears notes several instances of neighbors calling the police on their crossdressing neighbors. The police told the neighbors that, although they sympathized with the situation, the offenders were not in the public eye, so no laws were broken (173). In the case of people with disabilities, as Thomson puts it, “Disabled people were sequestered from public view in institutions and the private sphere as middle-class decorum pronounced it impolite to stare” (57).

When the undesirables were in view, they were stared at with reckless abandon (Thomson). It seems that, wherever such people went, they were ruthlessly ridiculed simply for being different. With this being the case, it is no wonder that historical freak show performers often formed special bonds with each other. Because these stigmas persist today, *Rocky Horror* provides a place where nonconformists can feel a sense of security and comradery at the events. *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* often acts as a safe haven for those who have been historically victimized and those who choose to be different.

Since the invention of VHS and DVD, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* is available for viewing in the safety of one’s home. People are no longer forced, though have the opportunity if they wish, to venture to the midnight screenings to enjoy the show. Scholar Amittai F. Aviram notes that the “*Rocky Horror* Cult ought to be celebrated in public spaces, late at night, in the dark, and not trivialized by suburban solitude and trips to the kitchen for beer” (183). While the comfort and unobtrusiveness of home may make the film more enjoyable for some, many fans feel that the film can only truly be enjoyed out in the open. A film as zany and chaotic as *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* deserves an equally crazy environment in which to be viewed. Embracing one’s differences in public is an important part of what *Rocky Horror* is all about.

Mark Siegel would definitely agree with Aviram’s stance. In the very first page of his article, Siegel describes having a need for celebration in a world that seeks to “restore social equilibrium” (305): a world in which, as Sears describes, “problem bodies” were hidden from the public eye and “normal” people roamed free (174). No person should feel they need to hide themselves from society’s view just because they are deemed a “problem.” The problem does not lie with those who are different, it lies with those who are “normal.”

These “normal” people are wholesome and good; they do not associate with “problem bodies” or crudity. If “freak” is a socially constructed term, then so must be “normal.” Whether it has a positive or negative connotation, a label is still a label. When this label is applied to an individual, this individual is put inside a box in which they do not necessarily belong. There may always be a dance between the “spectator” and the “spectacle” (Thomson 56). Between the two exists a dividing line that will keep the “freaks” performing and the “normals” staring. Performances like *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* will be there as well, however, to get us to question where and how that line is drawn.

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Freaks and Magic: The Freakification of Magical Creatures in *Harry Potter*

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The *Harry Potter* series has touched thousands of people around the world. Teaching lessons of humility, benevolence, friendship, and numerous other values, the series has shaped people's lives, particularly those of the children and young adults reading these novels as they

matured. While using the power of words to morally aid and guide readers, author of the seven-book series, J. K. Rowling, has also included social commentary about the hierarchal foundations of society. Right and wrong are directly addressed through the battles between Harry Potter and the antagonist, Lord Voldemort; however, more than black and white ideas of good and evil are featured within the novels. Rowling clearly critiques the wizarding world's hierarchy, which places witches and wizards in a superior position above other magical creatures. She describes the treatment of these creatures in a way comparable to the experiences of those who worked in freak shows of the nineteenth century, and, through these comparisons, Rowling critiques the treatment of both magical creatures and stigmatized people.

Each novel in the *Harry Potter* series corresponds with a year students spend at the wizarding school, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. At age eleven, Harry receives a letter inviting him to attend wizarding school for the next seven years. There, he befriends Ron Weasley, a pureblood from one of the kindest, yet least respected, wizarding families, and Hermione Granger, the most intelligent student in their year despite being born to non-magical parents. The trio navigate the hardships of school,

Abstract

By comparing the magical creatures within *Harry Potter* to the nineteenth-century freak show, the mistreatment and lack of concern for the basic rights of centaurs, giants, and house-elves are put into perspective due to the now-uneasy feeling many acquire when thinking of the exhibition of people as "freaks."

adolescence, and the rise of Lord Voldemort as he, for the second time, tries to conquer the wizarding world.

Through the experiences of Harry, readers are exposed to various magical creatures and the customs of wizards. Readers also gain an outsider's insight to the mistreatment of these creatures. Despite being a wizard, Harry is an outsider because he was not raised in the wizarding world. Lord Voldemort murdered his parents, and Harry's wizard-hating, non-magical aunt and uncle raised him. Despite attempts by Harry's relatives to keep all wizard knowledge from him, he follows the fate prophesized for him and continuously battles Lord Voldemort. The seventh novel follows Harry, Ron, and Hermione as they choose not to attend their final year of school but instead search for the way to defeat Lord Voldemort once and for all.

Through this seven-book series, obvious differences and distinctions between wizards and non-magical humans (or muggles, as the wizards say) are highlighted. However, a similarity between these two groups can be found in their othering of those who appear or act differently and their creation of a social hierarchy based upon this othering. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, real-world people with physical disabilities were placed on display both in traveling freak shows and local human exhibitions ("Appendix 14C"). These people were deemed different due to their physical appearances, much like magical creatures in comparison to wizards. In both the wizarding and muggle worlds, those who are physically different are either persecuted to the point of death or ostracized until they are no longer a part of society. Those who are considered "ideal" in both the wizarding and muggle worlds have achieved this status by shifting "perception...to claim the center" of the ideal spectrum "for themselves and banish others to the margins" (Thomson, *Extraordinary* 62-63).

By asserting their dominance in this way, wizards have achieved a position of complete superiority over other magical creatures. Part of this superiority is maintained through slanderous stories and malicious traditions passed down through families, a very important part of the wizarding world's social hierarchy. Power within the wizarding world is associated with the age of a family and whether the family is of pure wizarding blood. Just as pureblood wizards are more desirable among

wizards, the more “desirable” appearance of witches and wizards grants them superiority over other magical creatures.

The three types of magical creatures examined within this paper — giants, centaurs, and house-elves—all have physical character traits that immediately ostracize them within wizarding society: giants are too large, house-elves too small, and centaurs too animalistic. These three groups bear some semblance to wizards, but, by “having a human body differently configured, the monstrous body exists *beyond*” acceptance (Weinstock, “Freaks in Space” 328, emphasis original). Magical creatures are “at once the to-be-looked-at and not-to-be-looked-at” (Thomson, “Staring” 57). One is to note how different they are, but it is not acceptable to dwell on those differences for too long. Wizards, by creating an ideal image that can only be obtained by them, have created the less-than-ideal “in relation to what is human” (Weinstock, “Invisible Monsters” 275). Since wizards are still considered human, they have been able to create a permanent social hierarchy, based solely on physical characteristics, that places them in complete control at the top.

The question is then posed as to who decided wizards are the elite. Why are wizards ideal and other magical creatures so easy to critique? According to the series, in the fourteenth century, wizards decided it was necessary to determine intelligent beings from “beasts.” A being, as determined by the wizarding government, The Ministry of Magic, is “any creature that has sufficient intelligence to understand the laws of the magical community and to bear part of the responsibility in shaping those laws” (Rowling, *Fantastic Beasts* xix). Centaurs were aligned with wizards in the “beings” category while house-elves and giants were considered “beasts.” However, centaurs opted to change their classification due to how offensive it was to be compared to “hags and vampires” (Rowling, *Fantastic Beasts* xxiii).

While centaurs asked not to be considered beings, neither centaurs nor giants asked to be persecuted by wizards. In fact, many reject the giants and centaurs that attempt to integrate themselves into wizarding society. In contrast, house-elves welcome their inferior place in society. Only one can be found as an exception, and he is shunned by his fellow house-elves for seeking freedom and desiring freewill. However, the question of consent applies not only to magical creatures but also to those who performed

in freak shows. Some consented to their roles (Gerber 48) while others were purchased and considered the property of their manager (Thomson, *Extraordinary* 60, 72, 76-77). With the issue of consent, magical creatures within the wizarding world serve as the voice freak performers never had.

Centaurus are featured frequently within Greek mythology. Myths passed down describe centaurs as kind, but violent and unpredictable (Buxton 117). However, perhaps the most famous centaur, Chiron, is continuously spoken of with praise. Chiron taught and guided famous Greek heroes, such as Achilles and Jason. Being both “civilized” and “uncivilized,” Chiron was able to guide these heroes, and many others, through childhood into adulthood where they became great soldiers (Buxton 110). Chiron was able to accomplish teachings no man could, and, despite being from a partially wild species, he held a place of great respect during the height of Greek civilization.

Despite the respect and admiration Chiron achieved in the Greek world, wizards do not hold a similar regard toward centaurs. Centaurs consider themselves more intelligent than wizards, but they are kept at a distance due to their wild nature. In fact, despite the notion that centaurs are the more intelligent creatures, the text cites Law Fifteen B, a law that defines centaurs to be of only “near human intelligence” (Rowling, *Order of the Phoenix* 754). Based solely on the physical difference of centaurs in comparison to wizards, centaurs are considered less intelligent than the “ideal” or “perfect” specimen of nature, wizards. A law such as Law Fifteen B allows for the unjust superiority of wizards above centaurs, and it implies that centaurs lack the mental capacity to intellectually challenge wizards.

The lack of respect centaurs receive from wizards has led to tension and even hatred on the part of the centaurs. Centaurs do not appreciate being discriminated against, and they are not alone. Real-world laws discriminating against those who appear different have existed for centuries. Throughout human history, biases have created unfair ideals and unrealistic requirements for people to function within society. Those who did not meet these requirements were ostracized and considered lesser beings. During the eighteenth century, research was conducted to see if the deaf were “capable of reasoning” and, consequently, the Academy for the Deaf and the Dumb was opened in Scotland (“Appendix 14C”). Both centaurs in the wizarding world and the deaf in the eighteenth century were considered to be of “near

human intelligence,” and each group was compared to an unrealistic ideal, wizards and people who can hear, respectively. Eighteenth-century Europe did not see deaf people as fully capable members of society much like the wizarding world fails to see centaurs in the same way.

Not all magical creatures allow the biases against them to interfere with their relationship toward wizards. For a period of time, a centaur, Firenze, teaches divination to students at Hogwarts. Some students opt out of the course because they do not want a centaur for a professor. One reason for this could be their aforementioned classification as “beasts.” Another possible reason for a student’s discomfort with centaurs would be the wild appearance of centaurs and their foreignness due to physical ostracism. Centaurs live in the Forbidden Forest, a dangerous place where students are not only unwelcome but can also face punishment for entering (Rowling, *Sorcerer’s Stone* 127). Without the ability to approach centaurs and learn more about them, it is impossible for students to understand or feel comfortable around creatures portrayed as dangerous, wild animals.

By teaching at Hogwarts, Firenze attempts to bridge the gap between centaurs and wizards. His appearance at Hogwarts is the first interaction most students have had with a centaur, and it shows these students that not all centaurs are wild and uncontrollable animals. As far as wizards are concerned, Firenze’s teaching methods are far from conventional, but he shows he is a compassionate creature hoping to aid his students in whatever way possible. He is exiled from his tribe for choosing to interact so closely with witches and wizards, but he educates these students on the true nature of centaurs, a lesson that could not otherwise have been learned by many.

While the lack of knowledge about centaurs and their physical separation from wizards is partially accredited to their arrogance and hatred of wizards, the physical difference of centaurs also clearly plays a role in this ostracism. Like humans with physical differences who performed in freak shows, centaurs are viewed as visual spectacles. Wizards, by placing themselves in a social hierarchy far above centaurs, have allowed for misconceptions about the supposedly “wild” behavior of centaurs to be considered truth. Even Hermione says she “never really liked horses” when discussing her disinterest in taking a class taught by Firenze (Rowling, *Order of the Phoenix* 399). This is intended to be nothing more than a snide comment to upset one of her peers, but Hermione’s words say much about

how wizards feel in regards to centaurs. Hermione proves herself to be the most passionate and sensitive wizard when it comes to the needs of magical creatures; she even creates an organization to protect house-elves (Rowling, *Goblet of Fire* 224) and later works for the Department of Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures within the Ministry of Magic advocating for equal rights of all magical creatures (“J. K. Rowling”).

Hermione’s comment about Firenze is offensive and inappropriate, but it also shows she does not understand all the issues surrounding magical creatures. Spectators at freak shows did not see an issue with the performances, but, as science and medical understanding advanced, people began to realize how inappropriate freak shows were. The idea that “freaks” should not be allowed in public brought about the decline of freak shows and thus the medicalization of “freaks” in the 1940s (Thomson, *Extraordinary* 75, 78). However, the issue of staring did not dissipate. Despite having “freaks” locked away in asylums and hospitals, textual and visual media still created platforms to judge and other these people. As Hermione grows and becomes more educated, she learns that all magical creatures need aid and protection, not just house-elves. She advances her opinions and seeks to advance the opinions of others. Unfortunately, the medicalization of “freaks” failed to accomplish the same thing.

Giants, similar to centaurs, are seen as threatening to wizards, but there are vastly different reasons as to why each of these creatures are considered threatening. Giants are deemed a threat because of their size, strength, and irrational behavior while centaurs are threats due to their intelligence and blatant lack of concern for the opinions of wizards. Giants throughout human history tend to be depicted as villainous monsters that desire only to kill and obtain power, and this misconception flows through the wizarding world as well. The public opinion of giants is extremely negative, and this opinion supports the choice by wizards to place giants extremely low on the social hierarchy. Giants are ranked so low that their worth in comparison to wizards is never questioned, and, much like centaurs, their mistreatment never receives an advocate for change.

In fact, giants are questioned and judged negatively by Ron. Just as Hermione showed her lack of education and understanding in relation to centaurs, Ron shows he does not understand giants when he quickly and irrationally reacts to learning one of his friends, Hagrid, is a half-giant.

Hagrid, the Hogwarts gamekeeper and professor of the Care of Magical Creatures courses, proves himself to be perhaps the most compassionate and open-minded of the characters. He serves as a stark contrast to Ron's harsh words describing giants: "not very nice," "vicious," and "like trolls...they just like killing" (Rowling, *Goblet of Fire* 430).

How did Ron form these opinions of giants that vary so drastically from the one giant he knows? His opinions were most likely formed through stories he heard as a child. Giants are more severely separated from wizards than centaurs. While centaurs live in the Forbidden Forest just off of Hogwarts' grounds, giants no longer live in Britain but "abroad... in mountains" (Rowling *Goblet of Fire* 430). By having them located so far from wizarding civilization, there is no evidence all giants are not violent creatures. They stem from "dark regions of uncertain danger," and the only evidence of their interaction with society comes from stories passed down through generations (Cohen 19). These stories even affect the opinions of people, such as Ron, who are generally good.

As one can see through Ron's misconceptions, the ostracism of magical creatures simplifies the process of othering these creatures. Similar to the idea of ostracizing whole groups, people who work in freak shows are never portrayed as from a nearby location. If these people were local, they would seem less odd and far less extraordinary. The distant homelands of people in freak shows make them more "exotic" and interesting. Describing people in freak shows as "from an undefined and strictly non-British region of elsewhere" not only makes them seem physically different but also makes them appear to be representatives of a whole land of people, a whole land of potential "freaks" (Ferguson 245). With the homelands of these "freaks" being so far away, no one could know if there were a whole group of people in this specific location who looked and behaved differently. Freaks and giants are both judged because there is no evidence to contradict the stories about their heritage and nature that the audience and wizards are told.

Hagrid serves to contrast all that readers learn about giants, but it is important to note Hagrid himself is only a half-giant, born of a giantess and wizard (Rowling, *Goblet of Fire* 427-428). He exhibits the physical features of giants, such as height and size, but, since he is only a half-giant, he is considered small for someone of giant heritage. Both his small stature and "unwavering loyalty and goodness" sever "Hagrid from his lineage and the

past actions of his race” (Strimel 48). While he might be a half-giant, he is the “antithesis” of what many giants represent in wizarding society (Strimel 49).

However, despite Hagrid’s visual appearance giving way to his giant heritage, news of his heritage is still considered worthy of a newspaper headline. In a slanderous article describing Hagrid as a reckless professor with little care for his students and his mother as one of the cruelest giants to fight alongside Lord Voldemort, the popular wizarding paper, *The Daily Prophet*, tells the community of Hagrid’s true racial heritage (Rowling, *Goblet of Fire* 439). This changed the public perception of Hagrid. While some students were not comfortable with his teaching methods prior to the article, many become more outspoken after learning of Hagrid’s heritage.

While Hagrid wished to stay out of the headlines and not draw attention, managers and owners of people in freak shows thrived off of headlines and talk of their exhibits. Many “freaks” were given stage names including “King,” “Queen,” and “General” in order to draw attention to the performer. In addition to these titles, some performers changed their homelands and names to sound more European. Performers who were advertised in a prestigious manner typically boasted of their sophisticated language skills and their interactions with various members of royalty (Bogdan 29-30).

The other way that freak shows drew attention to performers was by presenting them as “savages.” An example would be the Aztec Children, a brother and sister from Central America who suffered from microcephaly, a disease categorized by “abnormal smallness of the head” and “incomplete brain development” (“Microcephaly”). They received their fame due to their racial lineage, much like Hagrid. Central America was “exotic” enough to spark interest among audience members, and, like many freakshow performers, their foreignness was played upon through their odd dress. Their dress was also a part of the international newspaper headlines that appeared when a wedding was staged for them in Russia (“Marriage of the ‘Aztec Children’”). News of their marriage made the Aztec Children an even larger sensation and surely brought them more fame and attention than they previous had acquired.

Like the Aztec Children, Hagrid was very young when he first gained attention of the wizards around him. Unfortunately, much like the *Daily*

Prophet article, this attention was not positive. As a student at Hogwarts, he was expelled for supposedly opening the Chamber of Secrets, home to a basilisk, a reptilian creature that was used to kill and injure muggle-born witches and wizards (Rowling, *Chamber of Secrets* 246-248). Evidence against Hagrid is not provided within the text. In fact, all information about the Chamber of Secrets points to nearly anyone besides Hagrid as the mastermind behind the attacks. The reader is made aware that one can only control the basilisk by speaking Parseltongue, the language of snakes, and a language understood mainly by those who are heir to the founder of one of the Hogwarts houses, Salazar Slytherin (Rowling, *Chamber of Secrets* 197).

Slytherin house is home to prideful witches and wizards who are “cunning” and “use any means to achieve their ends” (Rowling, *Sorcerer’s Stone* 118). Those within Slytherin house have “a thirst to prove” themselves and desire “greatness” (Rowling, *Sorcerer’s Stone* 121). While Hagrid might wish to prove himself innocent and a loyal friend, Slytherin house is a place where he clearly does not belong. Rowling has since announced that Hagrid was sorted into Gryffindor house (“Barnes and Noble”), a house filled with “the brave at heart,” so there are no direct ties between him and anyone in the line of Salazar Slytherin (Rowling, *Sorcerer’s Stone* 118).

When accused, Hagrid does not have the opportunity to undergo a trial, which, even for wizards, is atypical. This blatant disregard for Hagrid’s rights, education, and well-being serves as evidence of prejudice for his giant heritage. The prejudice did not end once Hagrid lost any chance at receiving a wizarding education. Nearly fifty years later, the Chamber of Secrets was again open, and Hagrid was, for the second time, convicted of a crime not supported by evidence. Once again, he did not face trial. Instead, he was locked away in the wizarding prison, Azkaban (Rowling, *Chamber of Secrets* 261-262).

Hagrid’s treatment is clear commentary on the flaws of the justice system in relation to those who are different. Readers are forced to question the morals of the wizarding world upon the realization that the idea of “innocent until proven guilty” is nonexistent here. It is much easier for wizards to choose a scapegoat rather than face the unusual concept that someone who is physically different might also be morally good. By admitting Hagrid’s innocence, the wizards would have to recognize that not all giants are violent murderers. The wizarding world would have to

acknowledge evidence supporting witches and wizards being just as capable, if not more so, than giants when it comes to murder. Giants, no longer ostracized due to the end of malicious rumors and stereotypes about them, would be accepted into society as evil witches and wizards were slowly thrown out. This acceptance of giants would cause a rift within the clearly fragile social hierarchy wizards have built around themselves.

In contrast to the freak performers and managers who falsified information to gain attention, some people opt to lie in order to stay out of the limelight. Hagrid is the most notable giant within the *Harry Potter* series, but he is not the only giant mentioned. Madame Maxime is the headmistress at the French wizarding school, Beauxbatons Academy of Magic. Like Hagrid, Madame Maxime is a half-giantess. She never admits to it within the series, and, when Hagrid inquires, she becomes incredibly offended. Rather than disclosing her heritage, she claims to “ave big bones” (Rowling, *Goblet of Fire* 429).

Madame Maxime clearly fears losing all she has obtained due to her heritage. If the wizarding world learned of her giantess nature, she would risk losing her position as headmistress due to the fear and hatred wizards have toward giants. Unlike Hagrid, she has managed to overcome stereotypes throughout her life and prove herself as a powerful witch. However, as is evident by the inclusion of only negative descriptions of giants, her reputation holds no standing when compared to her heritage. For Madam Maxime, being a spectacle will not generate popularity and intrigue but rather hatred and ridicule. It is in her own best interest to lie about who she is rather than openly advertise herself and her heritage.

In stark contrast to giants and centaurs, readers continuously encounter house-elves who genuinely *enjoy* their position and apparent enslavement within wizarding society. When describing her role in life, Winky, formerly employed by the Crouch family, says, “house-elves does what they is told” (Rowling, *Goblet of Fire* 99). She later admits to being “properly ashamed of being free” and not having a master to directly and obediently serve (Rowling, *Goblet of Fire* 379). While house-elves live alongside their masters, living adjacent to wizards is far from equality. Contracted to lifelong servitude, which, if not freed, is passed down unto their children, house-elves live in the cupboards or basements of their masters, so they are always available to serve and please in whatever way

necessary (Kellner 368).

Despite living alongside witches and wizards, house-elves do not live an enjoyable life. Most live in dirty, cramped, and dark spaces, and they do not own anything. Possessions would show an equal status to wizards, and that is the opposite of what is desired for most house-elves. In addition to not owning any possessions, house-elves also do not have traditional clothing; they gather cast-aside linens and wear these instead. House-elves gather these articles of clothing over time so they have something suitable to wear, even if many would consider clothing and linens that were thrown away to be far from suitable. Dobby wore only an old pillowcase, Winky and the Hogwarts elves tea towels, and Kreacher a rag (Rowling, *Chamber of Secrets* 12, *Goblet of Fire* 97, 376, *Order of the Phoenix* 107). When a master gives their house-elf an article of clothing, it is considered a sign of freedom. The house-elf is no longer employed and is free to do as he or she wishes.

The idea of having only non-traditional clothing is also present within freak shows. Saartje Baartman, better known by her performance name of “The Hottentot Venus,” was considered a freak due to the foreignness of her non-Western body, particularly her buttocks and genitalia. To exemplify how different her body was from the Western idea of “normal,” she would wear only small, tight-fitting clothing while on stage. This allowed for the audience to better gaze at her body and see she truly was a “freak” (Thomson, *Extraordinary* 72). Both Baartman and the house-elves were forced to wear negligible amounts of clothing in order to further other them and make it obvious how little they mattered in comparison to the audience and wizards, respectively.

Not only are house-elves denied proper clothing and suitable living conditions, but they are also verbally and physically abused. The most obvious example is Dobby’s struggles within *Chamber of Secrets*. Serving the Malfoys, a family known for greed, hatred, and pride, Dobby is continuously beaten and mistreated by his master, Lucius Malfoy (Rowling, *Chamber of Secrets* 334-337). Dobby is also forced to physically punish himself whenever he speaks ill of his masters or fails to directly follow the orders of the Malfoys. When Dobby warns Harry of the imminent danger at Hogwarts, he both circumvents a direct order and puts himself in a position where he spoke ill of the Malfoys. As punishment, he beats his head against the window, bashes a lamp against his head, and states that he would later shut

his ears in the oven doors (Rowling, *Chamber of Secrets* 14-17).

Winky, the only female house-elf encountered in the novels, is also verbally abused when she is released from her duties as the house-elf for the Crouch family. When her master, Barty Crouch, Sr., fires her, she cries and begs to remain employed (Rowling, *Goblet of Fire* 138). To most house-elves, being freed is considered shameful and a sign they have failed to accomplish their assigned tasks. Many house-elves believe they exist solely to serve, and being free shows they have failed at their reason for existence. Winky, shamed and filled with self-hatred due to her supposed failures, takes up drinking butterbeer, a popular wizarding beverage, rather than accepting her life without employment. While butterbeer has a very low alcohol content, it is enough to quickly intoxicate house-elves (Rowling, *Goblet of Fire* 536).

Dobby, in an effort to help Winky and potentially cease her self-medication, aids her in obtaining a job at Hogwarts. Once she is again an employed house-elf, Dobby thought Winky would find her way again and return to the happy elf she once was. Instead of recovering, Winky continues to drink and often fails to do any of the tasks she is assigned to complete. She wears various articles of clothing and sits on a stool drinking her butterbeer (Rowling, *Goblet of Fire* 536). Having been enslaved her whole life, Winky held no identity outside of her duties to the Crouch family. After losing her position as the family's house-elf, Winky lost all sense of identity. Without the family who so carelessly cast her aside, she was not able to find a purpose in life. Her new position at Hogwarts was not even able to bring her satisfaction because her existence revolved around another, now nonexistent, employer.

The third house-elf readers are introduced to in the series, Kreacher, is also abused. Sirius Black, Kreacher's master and Harry's godfather, is verbally abrasive toward his house-elf. The readers are led to believe this is due to Sirius' lack of respect for his deceased family members whom Kreacher idolizes and views as his "true" masters. No matter what the reasoning behind Sirius's verbal abuse of Kreacher is, it is not acceptable. Sirius, typically portrayed as a kind and caring man despite his desire to avenge the death of Harry's parents, does not see Kreacher as an equal, and, because of this, he does not hesitate to yell at or banish Kreacher from his sights (Rowling, *Order of the Phoenix* 110). Being raised in the wizarding world

by a pureblooded family, Sirius never saw any reason to consider house-elves equals or respectable members of society. Dumbledore himself took note of this and said Sirius never “saw Kreacher as a being with feelings as acute as a human’s” (Rowling, *Order of the Phoenix* 832).

The effect wizards have on house-elves is not merely a location on a societal hierarchy, and the same can be said for freakshow performers. As is exhibited by the treatment of Dobby, Winky, and Kreacher, house-elves are physically, mentally, and emotionally affected by the treatment their masters give them. Despite living lives of servitude, house-elves are sentient beings that require care and comfort. Abuse destroys a house-elf just the same as it destroys any other person or creature. While freakshow performers are performers, it does not mean they do not deserve respect, admiration, and care. Not all performers are abused or mistreated, but the audiences who gawk at them every day far from respect them. Just like the neglect of house-elves can destroy who they are, the neglect of people can be detrimental. The inability for wizards and humans to see this shows how truly self-absorbed many are.

A wizard’s lack of respect for house-elves does not end after abusing them. For the Black family, house-elves are considered a way to show their status as a pureblood family and as objects of décor. Upon the death of a house-elf, the Black family has the house-elf’s head mounted. These heads line the halls of the family’s home (Rowling, *Order of the Phoenix* 61). This practice has a very obvious freak element to it, similar to the exhibition of deceased children or stuffed oddities. Julia Pastrana, famous for her unusual physical appearance and sometimes compared to a bear (Thomson, *Extraordinary* 75), was stuffed, along with her infant son, post mortem to be displayed and admired for their physical differences. In the case of Julia Pastrana, she was seen as a way for her husband/manager to make a profit even after losing her performance abilities (Thomson, *Extraordinary* 77). With house-elves, mounting the heads of the deceased served no monetary purpose but showed pre-existing power and wealth as well as a long line of pureblood heritage. The mounted house-elves served as a symbol of status as well as decorative conversation pieces.

Despite intensive evidence showing how poorly house-elves are treated, not all suffer abuse through their masters. The house-elves working at Hogwarts live in the dungeons, but it is because the kitchens are located

there. No evidence is provided of abuse, and the employment of house-elves through Hogwarts started so they would have a good, safe place to work (“Transcript”). House-elves at Hogwarts, along with working in the kitchens, clean the common rooms of the various houses (Rowling, *Order of the Phoenix* 385).

While the house-elves at Hogwarts have living conditions and masters much kinder than many other elves, they are still considered enslaved. These elves are bound to work for Hogwarts until their death or freedom—whichever comes first. Hermione strives to change the working conditions of all house-elves. Being a student, her first focus is Hogwarts. She creates Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare (S.P.E.W.) in an attempt to radicalize the house-elves and show both them and wizards that the wizarding world needs to change and appreciate house-elves more. One of her goals is to free all the house-elves, so they can then be employed by Hogwarts in the traditional sense: a salary, vacation, and reasonable living conditions (Rowling, *Goblet of Fire* 224-225).

House-elves are similar to some freak performers in the sense that both are exploited due to their lack of life experience. Charles Stratton, or “General Tom Thumb,” became a very successful and wealthy “midget” due to his work in the freak show. He was able to buy lavish things, wear fine clothes, and travel the world—all things he would not have been able to accomplish while living with his family rather than in a freak show. However, the question needs to be posed as to what Stratton lost. Entering the freak show as a child, he never had another life (Gerber 50-51). Much like house-elves, Stratton was never truly given a choice as to how he wanted to live his life. He might not have felt as if he was suffering, just as house-elves think they live satisfying lives, but, without knowing what it is like living a life outside of the freak show or outside of servitude, it can never be known if Stratton or the house-elves would prefer a different type of life.

By creating an organization to benefit house-elves rather than giants or centaurs, Hermione shows she sees the differences in oppression these creatures face. Giants and centaurs recognize they are being wronged and denied fair treatment. This is evident through Hagrid’s experiences and the hatred centaurs feel toward wizards. However, house-elves feel they are doing what they were meant to do. They consent to their enslavement, but they do not realize a different type of life is available to them. In a sense,

house-elves have been brainwashed to believe there is nothing more to life other than servitude.

Dobby realizes there is more to life than blindly serving a wizard. Appreciating the employment conditions Hermione tries to advocate for through S.P.E.W., Dobby opts to seek employment at Hogwarts. He is rejected by many of the house-elves because it is considered unacceptable for house-elves to seek payment or reward for their services: the idea is that a house-elf should willingly serve his or her master without objection. Dobby's unwillingness to serve Hogwarts without pay is seen as a character flaw on his part (Rowling, *Goblet of Fire* 98, 379, 381, 538-539). The other house-elves frown on this because "they are totally incapable of rebellion, even in thought" (Morris 352). Since they have always been enslaved and serve for life, they know and understand no other life. The house-elves cannot see the flaw in their logic, and, because of this, they cannot escape the never-ending cycle of servitude within which they are trapped. They fail to realize that freedom and thus freewill is what allows them to truly consent to serving wizards. Until they obtain both these things, house-elves are nothing more than slaves.

Some may ask why those who performed in freak shows opted to do so. House-elves offer modern audiences an interesting comparison to freak performers and allow for a level of understanding not otherwise available to those who were not alive during the height of the freak show. While within a freak show, the performer needed to continuously please the audience, no matter what the price might be. People like Charles Stratton performed because they knew no other life. Others performed because the other choices they had in life were worse than being a "freak." One such person would be Otis "the Frogman" Jordan, a man born without arms. Throughout his life, he was unable to financially support himself. One day, when a carnival came to town, he did the classic trick of men without arms: "the survival skill of rolling, lighting, and smoking a cigarette, all with his lips." This trick gained him a job and financial stability, a comfort he had never before enjoyed (Gerber 48). For Jordan, consenting to being a "freak" was his only way to survive. He did not do it because he knew no other life but rather because he had lived another type of life and suffered for it. Dobby can be seen as comparable to Jordan because both were able to enter employment and make choices freely rather than feeling trapped.

While S.P.E.W. was far from as productive or accepted as Hermione might have liked, it does jar the reader and bring questions of societal issues to the forefront of the reader's mind. Up until this point, no one in the series questioned whether magical creatures should be treated differently. While S.P.E.W.'s focus is the welfare of house-elves, the original name for the organization was Stop the Outrageous Abuse of Our Fellow Magical Creatures and Campaign for a Change in Their Legal Status (Rowling, *Goblet of Fire* 224). This title, and later the headline for S.P.E.W.'s manifesto, implies Hermione's concern for all magical creatures, not just house-elves.

S.P.E.W., more specifically shown through its original title, forces readers and wizards alike to question the societal restraints and standards of the wizarding world. Hermione recognizes the unjust treatment of magical creatures, and, as Harry matures, he too becomes "aware of the hidden prejudices of wizard society" (Hall 78). Despite being the hero of the series, Harry himself is bullied and ostracized while at Hogwarts. It is through the alienation between him and the other students that Harry realizes magical creatures are treated unjustly. His own experiences allow for Harry to understand and relate to the rejected creatures of the wizarding world (Hall 78). This is evident even in the case of Kreacher. Within the final novel, Harry shows the house-elf kindness by waiting for Kreacher to calm down, asking the house-elf to take his time in talking to him, saying "please," and gifting Kreacher a necklace that belonged to one of his former owners (Rowling, *Deathly Hallows* 173-174). Despite Harry's lack of respect for Kreacher, he learned through his own personal experiences that every living thing deserves to be treated properly, even untrustworthy house-elves.

Through characters such as Hermione, Dumbledore, and, later, Harry himself, Rowling calls for the reader to critique witches and wizards. While it is not initially evident, the wizarding world is filled with prejudice toward other magical creatures. Characters that readers grow to love are ostracized and mistreated due to their physical and racial differences—differences that, in a society that credits itself for extreme intelligence and sophistication, should not be considered character flaws. Rowling clearly opposes the wizarding world for its self-righteous social hierarchy, and she aims to educate and inform readers as to the underlying prejudices within not only the wizarding society but the real-world society as well. As Dumbledore said, "we have mistreated and abused our fellows for too long" (Rowling, *Order of the Phoenix* 834).

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Kidnapped Amazonians, Severed Breasts, and Witches: Renaissance Perceptions of the Destructive Nature of the Freakish Female in Spenser's *The Bower of Bliss* and Shakespeare's *Two Noble Kinsmen*

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Social stratification operates via the vehicle of gender norms and the deviation from or nonconformity to these cultural expectations. Those people who cannot or refuse to conform to social norms are often the subject of spectacle, observed by society as outsiders in a metaphorical freak show. The societal attitudes of Renaissance England toward gender are permeated with a pervasive fear of feminine sexuality and the destructive impact that such “vehement passions” were believed to have upon men. This anxiety of gender nonconformity is especially prominent in the portrayal and perception of “foreign” women—females voluntarily transcending the roles of domesticity placed upon them or women deriving from cultures in which the ideals of femininity are noticeably different than those of Renaissance England. William Shakespeare and other authors within this time write from this bias when creating their own female characters, positioning these characters

Abstract

Freak shows are physical and metaphorical, demonstrating a cultural perception of what and who is privileged. In Renaissance England, Shakespeare and Spenser both write of deviant women and perpetuate the stereotypes of foreign women, creating literary “freak shows” in their works *Two Noble Kinsmen* and *The Bower of Bliss*. Whether these characters are Amazonian women disinterested in heterosexual romance or promiscuous witches, they are set as spectacle in the confines of their respective texts.

as commodities which readers may observe from outside of the text, as one stares at creatures in an exhibit. In Shakespeare's *Two Noble Kinsmen* and Edmund Spenser's *The Bower of Bliss*, two very different women—Emilia and Acrasia—emerge from a similar cultural anxiety concerning the inevitable carnality of female sexuality. Although both women approach their femininity in very different ways, their identities are shaped within the literary arena of spectacle within Spenser's and Shakespeare's texts (indicative of the universal Renaissance English biases against nonconforming women), and both lead to the downfall of the male ideal of temperance.

To write of something is to arrest it and place it on display so that it may be witnessed by readers. Spenser's *Faerie Queene* was a work channeling the essence of misogyny. One particular section of Spenser's epic poem, titled *The Bower of Bliss*, praises the chastity and holiness of the familiar in the form of Una, symbolic of the English Queen Elizabeth, while depicting the downfall of the wicked other embodied by Acrasia. Spenser's work is a form of the human zoo to show the binary of gender and cultural norms. Both the Queen and Acrasia are female leaders over their own respective kingdoms with the same perceived potential for weakness in comparison to a male, as indicated by their genitalia that, in the Early Modern period, would have been thought of as being internalized (and incomplete) penises. Their differences lie in their adherence or lack thereof to standards of idealized femininity. Elizabeth, the "virgin queen," is loved and becomes an effective ruler *in spite of* her identity as a woman; it is only by *not* openly utilizing that which marks her as female that she can effectively transcend the vices of carnality and excessive emotion that are thought to be characteristic of womankind. Acrasia represents the fulfilled fears of men concerning female sexuality in nearly every aspect. Spenser's poem views her through the male lens, identifying her socially unexpected qualities as one would label an animal in a zoo: mutant, sorceress, lustful. She is a witch who lures noblemen into her bower with her beauty and her spells.

When Sir Guyon, representative of male power and spiritual temperance, first comes across the enchantress, he sees her,

half-sleeping, on a bed of roses, clad in a veil of silk and silver,
all round were many fair ladies and boys singing sweetly. Not far
off was her last victim, a gallant-looking youth, over whom she

had cast an evil spell. His brave sword and armour hung idly on a tree, and he lay sunk in a heavy slumber, forgetful of all the noble deeds in which he had once delighted. (Spenser 163)

Acrasia claims men, taking physical and emotional control over them in a way that deviates from the expected female role of sexual submissiveness. Her identity as a sexually-active woman, living in her mysterious kingdom, labels her as dangerous and foreign in the eyes of Renaissance English society. She distracts noblemen from their spiritual and physical valor by initiating sex and adopting the masculine role of penetrating them, so to speak, with her temptation. Her victims are emasculated to the point where they become nearly feminine themselves, mutated by Acrasia's influence. They are compared to boys who have been stripped of their cultural markers of masculine significance, made into sleeping exhibitions to be passively acted upon by Acrasia. What separates men from women and from other lower life forms, what makes men perhaps more human than their female counterparts, is their abstinence from the animalistic lusts of sexuality. In Acrasia's bower are wild creatures which "are really men whom the enchantress has thus transformed. Now they are turned into these hideous figures, in accordance with their bad and ugly minds" (Spenser 165). They are viewed by Sir Guyon in the artificial habitat of the golden bower, living among the metallic fruit trees as zoo animals removed from their natural landscape, and are incorporated into Spenser's framework of nesting scenes of human bizarreness.

Such a society is in direct opposition to the patriarchal culture of Renaissance England and threatens the male privilege inherent in Spenser's setting. In Acrasia's land, feminine deviant power and sexual autonomy engender masculine inferiority and lead to Acrasia's delusion of her own capacity to lead. With the common concepts of a woman whose very emotional and physical wellbeing is at risk due to her deviant behavior, Guyon is completely justified in capturing Acrasia, "bound with adamant chains, for nothing else would keep her safe" (Spenser 165). This final act of caging Acrasia is to make her and her bower into a menagerie. She is a freak of nature, an anomalous woman to serve as an entertainment and a warning to all who look upon her: *See here what is different than us and know that her chains are the consequences of deviation.*

Within Shakespeare's time, a foreign woman like Emilia is something

of a paradox within the eyes of a masculine society; she is to be lusted after and to be won, to be appropriated into the traditional female domestic role in English society. Yet she is also to be feared. Such a woman is something to be captured and brought back to England, a prize token of the cultural other. The act of writing of such foreignness is, on Shakespeare's part, an active attempt to profit from the cultural fascination of exoticness by placing an Amazonian character on display for playgoers. Shakespeare's play *Two Noble Kinsmen* utilizes legends of gendered conquest with its introductory account of Hippolyta, an Amazonian woman, entering in a wedding processional with Athens' king Theseus. This very perception is, in and of itself, influenced by the misogynistic attitudes of the Renaissance period in that it paints Hippolyta, a woman, as the passive recipient of the marital desire of Theseus, a man. This introduction to the play *Two Noble Kinsmen* neglects to mention that, in mythology, Hippolyta is a ruler who is abducted with her sister and brought back to Athens. This act of male conquest against a female-dominated kingdom would perhaps have been approved of at this time, as it brings masculine order to the perceived chaos of a matriarchy. Such opposition of "exotic" feminine power is not an unfamiliar topic in Renaissance literature.

The act of introducing *Two Noble Kinsmen* with a wedding officiated by the god of marriage indicates a profound sense of female commodification. The portrayal of a divine figure watching over the upcoming nuptials of Hippolyta and Theseus implies that this marriage is not only acceptable, but that it and the non-consensual way in which Hippolyta is "won" as a bride are the prototypes of ideal matrimony. If Hippolyta is a symbol of the other, Theseus is the tamer who brings this powerful woman to heel and flaunts her physical variation in his court as a sign of status. She is made into a sideshow to demonstrate Theseus's power to shape a foreign woman with English ideals. This idea harkens back to the perceived danger that foreign women have in their independence; without male guidance and without conforming to the appropriate English ideals of feminine domesticity, women like Hippolyta are bringing themselves toward further danger of spiritual and physical debasement. Theseus, like Sir Guyon, is not a male conqueror but is a rescuer who is helping Hippolyta by holding power over her and thus by putting her "in her proper place." Despite the apparent conformity of Hippolyta and her sister Emilia to English

ideals of femininity, there is always a mistrust of their adherence to such standards because the very nature of women, especially those women from cultures that do not adhere to male-dominated gender roles, is perceived as dangerously carnal. There is the underlying fear that these mighty women, made to perform docility before the court like trained animals performing tricks, will turn upon their captors and destroy them with their feminine debasement.

Whether from willful choice or from an existence centered around emotionality, even the most well-intentioned woman's sexuality has the potential to destroy men, tempting them into the dregs of carnality. This ideology stems from the belief that such women operate in opposition to men, that they are incomplete or lesser forms of men and thus, by their very presence alone, can emasculate their partners. In Renaissance England, Biblically-sanctioned gendered behavior was expected in society and in the family unit: women were to keep house and care for children; men were to engage in community discourse. After all, "[i]n classical thought, folly is frequently associated with a feminized sexuality that is savage and transgressive. Christianity reinforces the connections between folly, sexuality and woman in the Fall myth" (Chakravarti 81). To tip these scales with non-normative behaviors is to commit an abomination against God's natural order of husbands lording over their wives, thus adopting the mantle of freakishness by threatening the social institutions that depended largely on Christianity and the assumption that men pass economic and political power to their sons. These norms are unmet by women such as the Amazonians, who are raised within matriarchal government and military systems. Amazonian women are free from the constraints of the patriarchal women who adapt to misogynistic standards, yet Emilia and Hippolyta are expected to naturally assimilate to this "traditional order."

According to Paromita Chakravarti, "[t]he dichotomies of passion and reason, nature and culture, formlessness and form inflect the male-female binary" in that they perpetuate the "stereotypes of irrational, instinctual and unstable women and rational, civil and balanced men" (80-81). Contemporary notions about friendship rose from Renaissance Humanism, cementing friendship between two men as the most important social relationship, "superseding all other possible human associations, including those connected with family, courtship, romance, marriage,

sexuality, service, fellowship, and politics” but threatened by “the unruliness of heteroerotic desires” (MacFaul 222). Women hindered the perceived perfection of male bonding, especially since Renaissance England was a patriarchal society. Autonomous women were criticized as attempting to erode these social norms with the indicative traits of the freakish female other: hyper-sexuality and hyper-emotionality. Physically, English women were expected to fulfill the role of Mother and Wife. Symbolic of these responsibilities are the breasts—objects of maternal care in the form of nursing and sexual gratification for men. Amazonian women were dually freakified as other; not only did they transcend the cultural gender norms that prevented Renaissance English women from having equal opportunities with their male counterparts, but they also looked physically different than English women. While the breasts were a blazon of the idealized wife and mother, the Amazonian warrior woman may have had darker skin and cut off her right breast to offer her better control of her bow and arrow (Foreman). Physically and culturally, the Amazonian woman as a character evokes intrigue and fear—an image of freakishness for a strictly patriarchal society.

Emilia is brought to Theseus’ court in the freakshow wedding processional of supposedly-tame Amazonian women, yet she does not conform to the English standard of privileging male-to-male friendships. In fact, she goes so far as to state, “true love ‘tween maid and maid may be more in sex dividual” (1.3.81-82). This line expresses gender nonconformity on multiple levels; not only does it outright state that women have the same capacity to form bonds that are equally, if not more, meaningful than the friendships held by men, but it also expresses the potential support of lesbian relationships over heterosexual romance. Emilia is an image of otherness, involved in everything that is dangerous and unusual to Englishmen: physical power in warfare and politics as an Amazonian princess and a lesbian identity deviating from expected female heterosexual submissiveness. She, as a character, is freakified upon the stage—she is written as a foil of Englishwomen to entertain an English audience, yet she is not even performed by a woman since most Renaissance theaters did not hire actresses.

Emilia’s identity within *Two Noble Kinsmen* threatens traditional male privilege in that it implies that men are not needed to form romantic

relationships or friendships, and in fact the presence of men might hinder women from having rewarding friendships and sexual interactions with other women. Emilia expresses a female sexual and emotional independence that questions the advantage of exclusively male friendships, viewing these homogendered masculine connections as being as freakish to her as her Amazonian identity is to Athens (a setting upon which are imposed the cultural norms of Shakespeare's England). As Emilia questions the power of male friendships, her very presence as a woman serves to break apart the quintessential relationship between Arcite and Palamon by invoking sexual desire in these two companions.

According to Kathryn Schwartz, “[a]ccounts of generation define woman as matter, man as spirit” (148). This gendered notion of existence is prevalent in the Renaissance in which women were seen as emotional beings that evoke sentimental fragility and sexual desire in men, while men themselves are perceived as being more spiritual beings—the likes of which could be gravely distracted from such a higher frame of being by the carnality of female nature. This fear comes to life in the text of *Two Noble Kinsmen* when Arcite and Palamon first fall in love with Emilia. Upon seeing her, Palamon exclaims, “Never till now was I in prison, Arcite... Might not a man well lose himself and love her?” (2.2.133-156). Arcite responds likewise by saying, “Now I feel my shackles” (2.2.157). In falling in love with Emilia, the men are confined to the chains of sexual desire that indicate feminine existence rather than enjoying their own mutual friendship. They have become toys for female pleasure and control, taking on the instability of sexual desire that society deems grotesque in men. The men shed the pure aspirations that established them as belonging within a chaste and patriarchal society, delving into the animalistic desires of carnality that were previously freakish to the young men. Although Emilia has no direct control over how these men perceive her, her very nature as a foreign female leads the men's friendship and the characters themselves toward their doom. Her innate bizarreness destroys Palamon and Arcite's friendship, establishing Emilia as a force of freakishness that corrupts what is normal.

With their shared attraction toward Emilia comes Palamon and Arcite's distraction from their plans of happiness, their thoughts that they would live their lives together. While they are in prison, they find comfort in one another's presence—Arcite tells his friend, “Whilst Palamon is with

me, let me perish if I think this is our prison” (2.2.61-62)—but their freedom for male-to-male unity is shattered by their lust for Emilia. Their feelings for her threaten their chaste masculine identity (similar to Acrasia’s victims). Emilia’s presence is foreign and changes the atmosphere of stability around her. Before they encounter Emilia, Palamon and Arcite agree that there is no record of any two humans who have loved each other as much as they do (2.2.113-114), yet after they have both fallen in love with her, Palamon tells Arcite, “You shall not love at all” (2.2.168). Due to the influence of Emilia, a nonconforming female who ignites the flame of earthly desire in the two noblemen, these characters immediately redefine their definitions of “love” from their prototypical standard of male friendship to mere physical attraction. This change in Palamon and Arcite’s perception indicates a Renaissance fear that women and the sexual desire that they incite have the power to cause men to alter or even lose their self-identity; women, especially those like Emilia who are open or nonconforming in their sexuality and gender expression, are not normal. Even putting such women on display as a testament of foreignness—as Emilia is when she is brought to Athens—can evoke the darkness of chaos in those who see her, releasing the inner freakishness of men who are otherwise held in balance by male friendships and chastity.

Initially, the two prisoners of war revel in their captivity, thinking that it will increase their ability to keep themselves pure of the outside world. Of their captivity, Arcite states, “Let’s think this prison holy sanctuary, to keep us from corruption of worse men” (2.2.72-73). The irony of this is that it is *female* corruption that breaks down their friendships and their desire for chastity. Arcite and Palamon’s adoration of Emilia is expressed as a form of idol worship, something unholy, even in their first expressions of love for the woman: “Behold and wonder! By heaven, she is a goddess!” (2.2.132). Sexual desire toward females is portrayed as being artificial in nature: a distraction from true worship and from the true happiness that can traditionally be found exclusively in male-to-male friendships, a sensation leading to the decimation of male values. The truly frightening quality of Emilia’s unusual identity is not that she is a symbol of what is different and otherworldly, but that she encourages a breakdown of social cohesion. She is a freak, but those who love her swiftly devolve into freaks themselves. The death of Arcite and Palamon’s friendship foreshadows the physical death

of Arcite, pointing toward the fulfillment of the fear that foreign women and their deviation from standards of domesticity engender the ultimate destruction of masculine identity.

Emilia is a double outsider. Within this play, there are levels of oddity: Emilia's perception of the exclusivity of male-to-male friendships, the Athenians' interest in and fear of the Amazonian women's status as symbols of alternative gender norms, and the English audience's observation of the play and their perception of Emilia's nonconformity as portrayed by a male actor. Even though she, unlike Acrasia, never actively endeavors to seduce men, her very existence as a female has this result. Her presence goes so far as to result in the accidental death of Arcite and, with it, the death of his potential to complete more noble activities and to reproduce in his lifetime, two standards that would have marked the life of a successful and fulfilled gentleman in Renaissance England and thus would have perpetuated the social norms of the day. The freakishness of her open femininity, in its lack of domesticity, forces her outside of the male-dominated society in which she has been placed; furthermore, her status as a foreigner isolates her within Athenian culture. The audience watching the play understands Emilia as a caricature of otherness, further emphasized by an actor performing her role. Emilia is thus perhaps predestined to hold a semi-villainous role from the very start of *Two Noble Kinsmen*. She is, in spite of herself, a force of chaos in the lives of men. Her life as an autonomous being identifies her as being a commodity to represent the novelty of the exotic Amazonian culture, yet due to her status as a foreign woman, she remains inherently dangerous to the ideals of the masculine society in which she is now forced to reside.

Emilia and Acrasia are two characters, written within the metaphorical freak shows of their texts, which are born from the fears of Renaissance society toward female independence and sexuality. The very concept of such feminine autonomy is a freakish concept in the masculinity of Spenser's and Shakespeare's England. These women are foils for idealized conformity and are written to be observed as freaks by readers. Emilia and Acrasia exist in opposition to the male privilege upon which much of the cultural infrastructure of the country is built. In the examples of Emilia and Acrasia, the reader is exposed to two females who question and/or threaten male power. The lives of these two characters, despite their very

different actions (Acrasia is intentional in her seduction of men, and Emilia has no control over Palamon and Arcite's perception of her), serve to lead toward the same result of the inevitable destruction of male temperance, embodying the freakishness of deviation and catalyzing the inner sinful lust that is the freak within all humans. This demonstrates the cultural fear that foreign women, as individuals who don't conform to traditional femininity, are destructive figures whose very nature undermines social masculine values. In their role as representatives of physical and cultural difference, these women have little to no ability to change this identity.

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“Man’s Hatred Has Made Me So”: Freakification and the Shifting Gaze in *The Phantom of the Opera* (1925)

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As the conventional freak shows reached their peak in the 1920s and began their steady descent, another art form came to take their place, complete with the potential to freakify its subjects in more complex, subtle ways. Film had begun with the minute-long footage of *The Horse in Motion* in 1878 (which was intended to answer a scientific inquiry, not to entertain), but it had since advanced to full-length movies, albeit without dialog until 1927’s groundbreaking *The Jazz Singer*. Although sitting in a 1920s theatre and watching a black-and-white silent film at first glance seems a far cry from the experience of going to a freak show, the similarities become apparent in the genre of horror. Like the freak show, the horror film delves into the liminal spaces between man and beast, often exploiting patrons’ desire to look on the physical differences of others, a desire motivated by the hunger for novel entertainments, as well as the need to establish the boundaries of cultural otherness and affirm one’s own position within the majority.

According to Stephen Prince, horror delves deeper than other genres into the “fundamental questions about the nature of human existence.” It interrogates “nonhuman categories” via “the violation of the ontological categories on which being and culture reside.” This creates an “us” versus “them” dichotomy. Horror films also generate a paradox in exploring “the

Abstract

By using artistic conventions only available through cinema, *The Phantom of the Opera* (1925) manipulates the gaze to create a character so inhuman and unsympathetic, he transcends the position of the freak into the realm of the monster. The silent horror version of this film extends the social construct of the freak into cinema so that, while the freak shows may have been closing their doors, the legacy of the freak lived on.

way that terror opens onto pleasure” (Prince 2, 3, 10). Jeffrey Jerome Cohen adds that the horror film is a safe space in which to make these explorations: “We watch the monstrous spectacle of the horror film because we know that the cinema is a temporary place, that the jolting sensuousness of the celluloid images will be followed by reentry into the world of comfort and light” (Cohen 17).

In many ways, the freak show performs these same functions. According to Rosemarie Garland Thomson in her book *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*, “Freak shows framed and choreographed bodily differences that we now call ‘race,’ ‘ethnicity,’ and ‘disability’ in a ritual that enacted the social process of making cultural otherness from the raw materials of human physical variation” (60). This made a silent horror film the perfect bridge between the old genre for freakification and the new. Indeed, Ian Conrich points out that freak shows and horror films alike explore “the boundary separating beast and mankind [that] is often challenged” by the monstrous portrayals characteristic of these movies (47).

Although many versions of the *Phantom of the Opera*’s story make use of the freak show trope (some even more explicitly than this one), the 1925 production in particular occupies an interesting place in American cinematic history as one of the age’s “horror spectacles” (Conrich 40); it also capitalizes on the shift of the freak show from the sideshow to the big screen during the age of silent film. In this production, the Paris Opera House is home of beautiful singers like Christine, the protagonist, and also to a much darker figure—the Phantom of the Opera, whose spectral presence has birthed a multitude of rumors and superstitions among the owners and patrons alike. Previously known as Erik, the Phantom is not truly a monster, but an escaped convict with severe facial disfigurements who lives beneath the opera house in what was once torture chambers. He has been giving Christine voice lessons for years and has become obsessed with the young singer, although they have never met face-to-face. His fixation on her reaches a crisis when another suitor, Raoul, plans to marry Christine; this leads the Phantom to finally reveal himself to her, albeit hiding his face behind a mask, and he proceeds to wreak havoc in her life and those of everyone else involved with the opera house. The film climaxes when the Phantom kidnaps Christine, Raoul rescues her, and an angry mob

chases the Phantom into the river.

The film serves as an extension of the dying freak show, performing an important move of shifting the process of freakification from live performance to the world of cinematic entertainment, “with a cinematic experience of images of the aberrant and the bizarre replacing the immediacy of the genuine (and often fabricated, or ‘gaffed’) disabilities of the live carnival” (Conrich 47). *The Phantom of the Opera* even features a character, Buquet, who is similar to a freak show’s master of ceremonies, complete with “his visceral descriptions and melodramatic manner” (Randell 77). Thus, by examining this film in particular, one can see the important ways that traditional freak show practices are enhanced and complicated by their new home on screen. By using artistic conventions only available through the cinematic medium, *Phantom* manipulates the gaze of the characters and the audience members to create a character so inhuman and unsympathetic that he transcends the position of the freak into the realm of the monster.

GAZING AND POINTING AT FREAKS

As the freak show transitioned onto the horror film screen, the silent film enhanced elements of its predecessor that were essential in the process of freakification; in particular, the silent film emphasizes the visual conventions upon which human exhibits relied, such as staring. In “‘*The Phantom of the Opera*’: The Lost Voice of Opera in Silent Film,” Michal Grover-Friedlander points out the way that silent movies and operatic performances both place emphasis on “an extravagance of gesture and movement” (180). This emphasis on gestures is particular to *Phantom*’s place in cinematic history. Norman King noted that there was a “marked” shift of “acting style away from the exaggeratedly gestural toward the naturalistic” in silent films that added sound beyond instrumental accompaniment (39). Because this film was made prior to this shift, it still carries all of the exaggerated gestures characteristic of both silent film and the opera. The Phantom uses such gestures to redistribute the gaze from himself as a physically disabled man onto the female object of his desire.

Throughout my analysis of the film, I noticed that most of the extravagant gestures originated from the object of freakification, the Phantom. The most prominent and frequent of such gesticulations is that

of pointing. While the objectifying gaze—the act of staring—has received much discussion within critical conversations about freakification and disability studies (see Thomson’s book, *Staring*), this film demonstrates the importance of the physical gestures that accompany it. The act of pointing is a more extreme form of freakification than the gaze because it takes staring one step further by adding a direct physical action that is apparent to potential onlookers. This increases the attention drawn to the object of the gaze. Several times, the Phantom points dramatically at Christine in a way that emphasizes his reversal of the gaze onto her.

Although Erik is treated as a “freak” because of his physical disabilities, very rarely do other characters point at him, while he points at Christine no less than nine times. The two observed moments where Erik himself is the object of pointing occur early in the film, and, in one of them, he points to himself before the intertitle screen (the printed text screens that interrupt filmed action in silent movies to provide dialogue and narration) conveys his words: “Men once knew me as Erik, but for many years I have lived in these cellars, a nameless legend” (43:00). The other is when Christine accuses him of being the infamous Phantom (42:23). Other than these two early instances, the rest of the moments in the film that include pointing occur either when he points at Christine or, in the two instances, when he gestures toward an angry mob (1:40:30, 1:40:44). The sheer number of times this happens over the course of a film just under two hours and the fact that the pointing almost always serves to emphasize an implicit relationship between the Phantom and Christine demonstrate the importance of this extended form of the gaze to the film.

Often, the Phantom uses these gestures to create a sense of accusation or anger toward Christine. Other times, this motion serves to draw attention away from himself: after Christine sneaks up behind him and removes his mask, he points at her in a dramatic moment when her fear—both of his newly-revealed face and his ominous advances—is evident (50:27). Additionally, when his gesture refers to the angry mob of people who are hunting him down, Erik is striving to deflect their gaze from himself by redirecting it back onto them.

Besides the way that pointing functions *within* the film, it is also important to consider what this gesture serves for the story *as* a film, a visual art with viewers. When a character points to something or someone

else on screen, this motion draws the eye to the object of the gesture. Since this action is nearly always observed coming from the Phantom himself, this demonstrates a way that the character is drawing attention away from himself, whenever he is being freakified. He takes the gaze that is implicitly on him due to his position as a freak and twists it by deflecting the audience's gaze onto someone else, inviting the audience to look with him, instead of at him.

Within the context of a freak show, it would have been common to see patrons pointing at the human exhibits; this invites the others witnessing the myriad of human oddities to join that individual in gazing at one specimen in particular. This invitation to gaze with someone else is inverted in *Phantom* the same way that it would have been if one of the exhibits at a freak show had been pointing back at the patrons; this would have given the audience pause as they attempt to navigate the fact that their visual attention is being drawn away from the freak and toward a member of the normate population, someone who looks like them.

The act of pointing to one of the patrons at a freak show could have caused those present to acquire empathy for the one at whom they have been pointing, thus restoring a semblance of that freak's humanity. However, while this gaze reversal could have humanized the Phantom, making him someone with whom the audience could empathize, the way that the film consistently animalizes this character prevents such a reaction, creating a tension between the freakifying gaze, its reversal, and the portrayal of the freak himself.

THE MIRROR AND MASK AS MODERATORS FOR THE GAZE

Two ways that this film endeavors to construct the Phantom as a freak is through its use of the mirror and the mask. Scholars like Grover-Friedlander and Andrew P. Williams have discussed the presence of mirrors in the film, but the connection between these set devices and freakification has yet to be explored. Williams focuses on the mirror as “mark[ing] the boundary between the patriarchal code of Raoul and the exotic mysteries of the ‘sexual other’” (92). By contrast, Grover-Friedlander looks a bit closer at the film's reflection in its many mirrors, agreeing that their main power is in their ability to transform the characters but also noting their implied

connection to power dynamics. According to this author, mirrors emphasize the ways that “the voice of the Phantom will overpower the prima donna’s voice” and how they later “signify the Phantom’s loss of power over the prima donna’s voice when Christine crosses through the mirror and sees him: the mirror becomes merely one of the Phantom’s [fetishized] objects underneath the opera house, and at that point it has lost all power” (189).

Missing from this discussion is an examination of the implications mirrors have for freakification. For any individual whose physical appearance has served as the catalyst for societal freakification, the image in a mirror can understandably range from causing depression to inciting rage. The implication that the gaze—particularly at one’s self—is something to be feared is evident when Raoul and Leddoux of the Secret Police “have fallen into the room of many mirrors—the old torture chamber!” (1:22:42). The idea of having mirrors in a torture chamber is both logical and haunting: not only would the objects of torture be in agony, but they would be seeing the acts and the results of those actions on their physical bodies as they occur, creating implications of psychological torment in this scene that stem from the mirrors themselves. Likewise, the Phantom here demonstrates that, from his perspective, seeing oneself is the ultimate form of torture. As society has freakified Erik throughout his life, he has grown to associate his physical appearance as the source of this torment. Seeing himself is thus equated to torture in this moment, demonstrating the inherent connection between being freakified and being tortured.

However, the Phantom turns what could be objects of loathing into portals through which he gazes upon the object of his obsession: the beautiful Christine. As Williams observes, the two-way mirror in Christine’s dressing room allows the Phantom to “gaze into the mirror and see the beauty” instead of “the painful realities of his own reflection” (92). Instead of coming to terms with his freakishness, he channels that energy into creating the perfect woman, training her through vocal instruction and conditioning her to call him “Master” (21:57). In this way, the Phantom continues to reverse the gaze away from himself—who cannot see himself in the two-way mirror—and onto Christine. By thus manipulating their use, he transforms the mirrors that would present him with his own “deformities” into access points to socially acceptable beauty.

A key point to emphasize here is the way that the conventional

gaze between the freak and the normate—which appears countless times throughout the film—is reversed through the mirror. Throughout the first half hour, Erik has been watching Christine, gazing upon her, with and without her consent, through the one-way mirror. Indeed, he “does not appear in person until the fourth reel of this production, but his shadow manifestations are said to be enough to enthrall the spectators” (“Lon Chaney Plays Role”). Since he does not appear right away, it is through his intertitle lines and descriptions from other characters that the audience builds their initial impression of him.

Erik controls his image by restricting access to it through hiding (both out of sight and behind a mask), but he frames the first real encounter with Christine as a privilege for the young singer. Prior to his appearance in her dressing room, he says, “Soon, Christine, this spirit will take form and command your love!” to which she responds, “Call for me when you will. I shall be waiting” (22:20). When he finally comes for her, she is “ready, Master—waiting!” to finally meet him, and he tells her to “[w]alk to your mirror, my dear—have no fear!” (32:20), giving her permission to see him, albeit still in a restricted sense as he keeps his mask on.

Prior to his unmasking, it appears that Erik might be the same as other men, even if he seems a bit socially awkward and sleeps in a coffin. However, at the moment of the unmasking, the audience faces an entirely new being. After Christine takes off his mask, “[n]o longer needing to hide his ‘otherness,’ Erik’s tender appeals for love disappear,” to be replaced with animalistic, violent forwardness (Williams 93-94).

Like the anatomical museums that were declining alongside the freak shows (finally closing their doors in the 1930s), this moment splits the character in two. These exhibits displayed “the Body with a capital B, separate from, deprived of, punished by, or in rebellion against, a moralizing, rationalizing, disciplining Spirit” (Sappol). Likewise, the spirit of Erik truly becomes separated in this moment from the physical body and social construction of the monstrous Phantom. This transformation is indicative of one of the main ways that this film creates a cinematic freak show: by presenting Erik as an animal, the movie plays into a larger trend of framing those with disabilities as something less than human, thus rendering them outside of the same moral purview that might hinder one’s ability to fully freakify the individual.

The exact moment when Christine takes off the mask marks a turning point in the film where it shifts definitively into the genre of horror. According to a review from the time of the film's premier, "The scene wherein curiosity impels her to remove his mask is said to be manipulated so that the simple act of slipping off the disguise furnishes excitement" ("Lon Chaney Plays Role"). Indeed, the intertitle sets the scene as the Phantom proclaims, "Yet listen—there sounds an ominous undercurrent of warning!" (49:23).

As Christine reaches for the mask, her face bears an expression of anticipation that quickly turns to horror when the mask finally comes off (50:20). For the next two minutes, the camera switches between direct face shots of Lon Chaney (the actor playing the Phantom in this film), bearing a wide-eyed, gaped-mouth, inhuman expression, and full scene shots of him looming over Christine's fearful huddled form. He grabs her face, forcing her to look upon him, with the words, "Feast your eyes—glut your soul, on my accursed ugliness!" (51:20). In his action and word choice, we find a sense of violence in the gaze he invites; instead of a more permissive request or a gentler touch, the Phantom is demanding that she look at him, while physically not giving her any choice in the matter.

Here, the Phantom becomes, like freak show exhibits, a personification of anxiety about physical difference in such a way that impairs one's ability to empathize with him. The particular appearance of the Phantom's face in this moment establishes definitively what the film has been hinting at thus far: that Erik is something less than human. His face is presented as distorted, practically beyond recognition as a human face. As Grover-Friedlander describes,

[T]he visual image is stretched out, formless, transgressive, shapeless, emphasizing the hollowness of the skull, the beastliness of the eye, nose and mouth cavities, and the lack of humanity in the Phantom's face. Described in terms of orifices and cavities—noseless visage, black holes instead of eyes—the Phantom's face is the negative of a human face, a trace of a human body, a literally phantom-like living corpse. (188)

Previous to this moment, there have only been rumors of his appearance to feed the audience's curiosity, and these descriptions vary and even contradict each other, like when the dancers "saw him for an instant—a

gray shadow—and he was gone!” and they cannot agree if he had a nose or not (10:34). Thus far, the Phantom is less than human in his ghostlike elusiveness; however, in this moment of unmasking, the audience members, with Christine, get to see for themselves. Here, inhumanity transitions from ethereal and elusive to material and monstrous. The film constructs an inhuman and unsympathetic character, and the way the unmasking is presented emphasizes these efforts.

From this moment forward, the film includes several scenes and intertitle word choices that emphasize the animalistic portrayal that plays into the freakification of this character. Twice, Christine directly calls him a “monster” when talking to Raoul (1:00:24, 1:08:20). Additionally, the phrase permeated the film’s reviews, calling him “the inhuman monster of iniquity” (“Lon Chaney Plays Role”). This specific word has great implications on the freakification of an individual because, by using this term, Christine designates that his status as a human being is not only in question, but that it is beyond hope—he is not only monstrous, but a monster.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the implications of this term are clear. The original definition of the word was “a mythical creature which is part animal and part human, or combines elements of two or more animal forms, and is frequently of great size and ferocious appearance,” and the later and more general definition is “any imaginary creature that is large, ugly, and frightening.” Another definition it provides is “a person of repulsively unnatural character, or exhibiting such extreme cruelty or wickedness as to appear inhuman” (“Monster”). Together, these definitions demonstrate the implications of the term the film uses to identify the Phantom: Erik is presented as ugly, frightening, and repulsive, somewhere in the liminal space between human and animal—the same space to which the freak show banished such real-life performers as Joseph Merrick (the Elephant Man), Stephan Bibrowsky (Lionel, the Lion-Faced Boy), and P.T. Barnum’s “What is It?” exhibit. According to Thomson,

the freak show defined and exhibited the ‘abnormal.’ By highlighting ostensible human anomaly of every sort and combination, Barnum’s exhibits challenged audiences not only to classify and explain what they saw, but to relate the performance to themselves, to American individual and collective identity (“The Cultural Work of American Freak

Shows” 58).

Indeed, the use of the term “monster” plays into a history of exploring and exploiting liminality within the freak show: according to Thomson, “the word monster [is] perhaps the earliest and most enduring name for the singular body.... By challenging the boundaries of the human and the coherence of what seemed to be the natural world, monstrous bodies appeared as sublime, merging the terrible with the wonderful, equalizing repulsion with attraction” (“Introduction” 3).

This aspect of the character aligns with Thesis III of Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” which is that “the monster is the harbinger of category crisis.” Within this section of his work, he explains,

[The] refusal to participate in the classificatory “order of things” is true of monsters generally: they are disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration. And so the monster is dangerous, a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions. (6)

By the very nature of his existence and the way that he is perceived by the normate (coupled with how the film consistently places emphasis on a monstrous portrayal), the Phantom is a monster of hybridization. The fact that people cannot easily classify him as man or beast is cause for anxiety and fear, as is reflected on the faces of the other characters in the movie who see him without his mask—not to mention on those of the audience members who saw the film when it came out in 1925.

Beyond the moment of unmasking, the importance placed upon the necessity of the mask at the beginning likewise emphasizes the scenes in which the Phantom foregoes it. There is a significant difference between how the Phantom acts with his mask and without it. Most notably, his change of attitude toward its absence is worth examining. At first, when Christine takes it off, he is distraught and violent and even appears to cover his face and cry at one point (50:30). However, after this moment when the mystery has been lost and he knows that Christine cannot unsee what she has seen, this element of shame falls by the wayside in favor of exaggerated expressions and anger.

After the scenes at the Bal Masque de l’Opera, Christine and Raoul retreat to the opera’s roof to talk, while the Phantom secretly leers down

at them from the gargoyles above (59:42). When Christine proclaims that “[h]e is a monster—a loathsome beast! You must save me from him, Raoul!” (1:00:24), Erik’s gestures and facial expressions align him with the gothic statues; Chaney performs without the mask as the Phantom’s cloak billows in the wind in a stark parody of the visible angel statues. The cinematography and acting in this scene show how, without his mask, Erik has fallen from the angels of love and music to become one of the opera house’s most intimidating gargoyles.

The appearance of these particular forms of architectural adornment creates its own set of implications. According to Cohen, “Gargoyles and ornately sculpted grotesques, lurking at the crossbeams or upon the roof of the cathedral, likewise record the liberating fantasies of a bored or repressed hand suddenly freed to populate the margins” (17-18). This scene aligns the Phantom with these same sentiments; he embodies that feeling of liberation and freedom that come with being on the edges of society, of not belonging to the normate population. He embraces his monster status in this moment and joins the gargoyles in their inhuman and terrifying freedom, which threatens the safety of innocents like Christine and Raoul.

Another moment where his sans-mask human status comes into question is when he stalks Raoul’s boat in the underground lagoon as the lover searches for Christine. Just after insisting that he is “a human like other men” (1:23:12), he contradicts this statement with his actions as he uses his cane to breathe underwater, implying that he is a creature from the deep. This is only intensified when he emerges from the depths later, framed in a manner that makes him look even less “human” than usual (1:27:05).

Likewise, the Phantom contradicts his claims to humanity with his language. At one point, he compares himself to a toad, saying “No longer like a toad in these foul cellars will I secrete the venom of hatred—for you shall bring me love!” (1:21:32). In addition to these animalistic portrayals, he also often refers to himself as a spirit, demonstrating a dichotomy between his aspirations to be more than human and his treatment as less than human. This spiritual element, though, is not always presented in a positive light. For example, at the beginning, he frames himself as Christine’s spirit guide of music; later, he calls her an “ungrateful fool,” saying, “You have spurned the spirit that inspired you—the spirit that made you great!... Now, you shall see the evil spirit that makes my evil face!” (1:21:01). This aligns

with the preconception with which many in the audience could have walked in, for frequently “the trope of disability is used to connote evil” (Randell 71).

Later, while driving the cart without his mask, he is depicted with an expression that reads as crazed and even non-sentient. He throws the cart’s driver to the ground and boards the front bench quickly, with a dazed Christine in the backseat. He maintains this expression throughout this scene, laughing and staring directly at the camera, confronting the audience with his freakishness (1:42:20). In the film’s final moments, as he runs from the angry mob, he suddenly seems to become aware of his face’s nakedness, attempting to cover it with his cloak (1:43:47).

In this moment, the tension between his masked and mask-less selves comes forward as he faces the way the rest of humanity sees him. Although he has himself contributed to the construction of his freakification, that position was originally bestowed by society, which is now embodied in the angry mob. As the film’s freak, it is necessary that some segment of the normate populace destroy him in the end; Cohen explains that monsters must meet this kind of sticky end because of the way that they are “transgressive, too sexual, perversely erotic, a lawbreaker; and so the monster and all that it embodies must be exiled or destroyed” (16). In these final moments, though, Erik clings to his humanity and hides the physical deformities that were the focus of his original ostracism in a last-ditch effort to deconstruct, or at least deflect, freakish identity; however, while there may be a happy ending for Christine and Raoul, Erik gets no such mercy in a tragic end to a miserable, fundamentally misunderstood, character who really only desired to be loved. This purpose became hopelessly distorted from the moment Christine removed that mask.

CINEMATIC CHOICES: THE ROLE OF SETTING AND CASTING IN ERIK’S FREAKIFICATION

Besides props like the mirror and the mask, the film’s use of set also works to create the monstrous portrayal of the Phantom. As a 1925 review of the film states,

Most of the more horrible and impressive scenes of the picture take place in the cellars and sub-cellars of the opera house where one’s appetite for thrills is regaled with ghostlike shadows, trap doors working unexpectedly, an underground lake and torture

chambers in which one may be smothered with heat or suffer almost any untold agony. (“Phantom of Opera,’ New Film at Astor”)

The dramatic difference between the dark, dismal cellars and the light, beautiful opera house creates a distinction between those who inhabit these spaces. The film establishes this division early on, from the first intertitle: “Sanctuary of song lovers, The Paris Opera House, rising nobly over medieval torture chambers, hidden dungeons, long forgotten” (2:57). Following are establishing shots of the opera’s beautiful architecture and interior. Then, viewers witness a perfectly choreographed performance of two hundred dancers (“Paris Opera Reproduced”), all of whom look identical, moving as one. This establishes the societal ideal that is reinforced by the audience’s applause. The set and dancers present a society where conformity is key, and where aesthetic beauty is necessary for acceptance, directly contrasting with the Phantom, who is alone and monstrous.

When the Phantom enters this realm of beauty, the film shows the disastrous results of this mingling. In addition to the ways that he causes psychological and physical harm to the heroes, the set demonstrates this point through the chandelier. Clearly the pride of the opera house, the Phantom causes it to fall, leading to pandemonium in the crowd (28:52). The chandelier’s wreckage is symbolic of the perceived destruction of social order and beauty that occur when a freak breeches the outside world and pursues beauty. This scene of set destruction reinforces the preconceptions that audience members would have had based on freak shows, a context that would have insinuated that the freak, being less than human, does not belong in the company of man.

In an examination of the sleeping quarters, viewers can see an additional way that the Phantom’s less-than-human status in society has permeated his definition of self. In the cellars, the Phantom possesses two places for sleeping: an ornate boat-shaped bed that he bequeaths unto an unconscious Christine (43:38), and a coffin he identifies as his own, a bed which “keeps me reminded of other dreamless sleep that cures all ills—forever!” (42:11). The contrast between these two beds and their implications demonstrate how he sees himself as less than human, as a living corpse of a man incapable of rejoining the society of people even in such simple ways as his own choice of amenities. The socially constructed position of the

freak that he occupies has permeated his views of himself to the point where he doesn't need other people to tell him he's a freak—he affirms this title himself regularly.

In order to create the most freakish character possible, this film chose to have the Phantom played by actor Lon Chaney, who “was recognized for his portrayal of grotesques: physically malformed, or disfigured, afflicted, and stigmatized” (Conrich 46). Throughout his career as an actor, he had the roles of a variety of disabled characters, such as Quasimodo in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1923) and a cripple in *The Miracle Man* (1919). In “Lon Chaney Plays Role of Paris Opera Phantom,” a *New York Times* review of the film from 1925, the author discusses the importance of this casting choice. Chaney was known for playing the disabled: “Mr. Chaney... made a specialty of appearing as a distorted or crippled person” (“Lon Chaney Plays Role”). So, by choosing Chaney for the role, this film plays into the expectations that the audience members would have had for a Chaney monstrosity.

Indeed, another review stated that with this film the actor “adds another gruesome, and this time spooky, characterization to his [list] of interpretations.” This particular review actually cites Chaney's portrayal of the Phantom as perhaps going too far: “there is something wanting in... sincere characterization. This is partly because in the leading role Lon Chaney is so much taken up with being hideous and with giving the audience the horrors that he has forgotten to be a bit human as well” (“New Film at Astor”). This critique of the film demonstrates how people viewing the film at the time of its release would have been aware of the way that Chaney's portrayal freakifies Erik to the point of losing his humanity. By playing his monstrous character almost too well, Chaney engages with the same practices freak shows used to distance their performers from their patrons. Instead of a human, empathetic response to the disabled person, the viewers are instead encouraged to see them as nothing more than freaks.

This can be partially attributed to the film's time period. According to Karen Randell, “It is possible to see this repeated motif of the deformed and disfigured man in Chaney's films as a deferred or latent representation of the disabled veteran” (70). However, while she believes that the film “both exhibits the body as fascinatingly grotesque and portrays the damaged male body as a site for sympathetic response” (76), I argue that the actor and

setting alike animalize Erik beyond the point of empathy. By manipulating the gaze, emphasizing pointing, and dehumanizing the character, the film engages with the same practices as freak shows, while complicating them with the nuances of the new medium.

CONCLUSION

When Erik responds to Christine's accusation by stating, "If I am the Phantom, it is because man's hatred has made me so" (42:33), he points to the nature of freakification: freaks occupy a socially-constructed position. Similarly, the film constructs this position via its participation in and reversal of the gaze, emphasis on dramatic gesticulations, tropes like the mirror and the mask, and cast/set decisions. These practices are eerily reminiscent of the ways that freak show directors would carefully construct the identities of their performers. Thus, the 1925 version of *The Phantom of the Opera* extends the social construct of the freak into a cinematic construction of the monstrous portrayal so that, while the freak shows may have been closing their doors, the legacy of the freak show lived on.

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A Freak Show in *District 9*: The Construction of a Freak Amongst Aliens

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Aliens have descended on Johannesburg, and they now live in slums; this would be a fairly accurate summary of Neill Blomkamp's 2009 film, *District 9*. It is a gritty science fiction film that combines the prejudice and violence of South Africa's Apartheid with the existential fears inspired by extraterrestrial life. Filmed partially in a quasi-documentary style, the movie portrays the downfall and transformation of Wikus van de Merwe, a rather boring white man who has been put in charge of the city's alien population through nepotism. As such, *District 9* has been called a "violent, racialized revenge fantasy" (Rieder 41), and many commentators are divided on its merits. But Wikus's transformation acts as more than just a vehicle to escalate the film's racial tensions; Wikus comes to occupy the role of the freak in the movie as his physical body becomes feared, revered, and commodified. Through the positioning of Wikus as a freak, the human population is forced to address the socially constructed and arbitrary divide between alien and human.

Is there room for a freak in a film about aliens? Yes, but do not make the mistake of believing aliens and freaks to be entirely separate entities. The two categories are closely related, and they spring up from the same source, the mysterious other. In her book about the archetype of the alien in science fiction, *Alien Theory*, Patricia Monk gives a comprehensive history of the other, which she describes as an unknowable and outside presence

Abstract

In *District 9*, the body of the main character, Wikus van de Merwe, becomes a battleground for the competing cultures of human and alien. But while it is widely recognized that the film is a science fiction metaphor for the Apartheid, less discussed are the parallels between Wikus's story and that of the historical freak. This essay looks at the way in which Wikus's transformation and clashing identities make him the star of Johannesburg's own alien freak show.

to ourselves (3). Freaks are other when measured against the normative standards of society; they are individuals who have experiences and appearances outside the understanding of someone classified as normate. Aliens in science fiction are other as well, though they are considered unknowable to all of humanity instead of one society, culture, or social group.

In this way, the normate is defined by the non-normate. Rosemarie Garland Thomson, a prominent scholar in the field of disability studies, describes this usage of opposing categories as part of the “cultural work” of the historical freak show. Audiences of the freak show could reaffirm their own understandings of the normate by viewing someone displayed as a freak and subsequently be reassured that they were themselves normates (64-65). As such, these opposing categories each define the other, the normate versus the non-normate. In *District 9*, this opposition is demonstrated by contrasting the alien Prawns with the normate humans, where the category of alien works similarly to the category of freak in the historical freak show.

Furthermore, aliens and freaks are both constructed categories within society. Jeffrey Weinstock points out that anyone can become a freak or an alien in theory because there is no single identifier or individual characteristic which defines these categories (329). Instead, the forms of alien and freak are defined against the normate of a society so that they embody the other. Both aliens and freaks occupy the same liminal space between wonder and logic, which can be seen in the presentation of historical freak show acts. The people being exhibited were displayed and sensationalized with exaggerated origin stories, but at the same time, medical examiners and scientists would be brought in to explain the physical differences these individuals demonstrated and validate public interest in their bodies. The idea of aliens operates similarly, exciting existential and wondrous fantasies while that same attention is given credence by scientific inquiry.

The alien and the freak then erupt from this intersection of the awe-inspiring and the scientific. Prior to the first buddings of modern science, there existed a category of otherness which Monk labels “the supernatural Other” (7). This is a class of the unknowable that operates without explanation and beyond the limits of physical laws, most often in folklore

and theological contexts – for example spirits, demons, or angels. These creatures were believed to exist without the need to be proven or studied, and they often induced awe, wonder, or terror in the cultures from which they had sprung. But with the birth of the sciences came the need to study and classify the world, both known and unknown.

This begins, as Warren Smith notes, in 1832 with teratology – the study of abnormalities in the development of living beings (180). Careful observation took away the wonder of earlier belief, replacing it with an interest in clinical pathology that would shape modern medical science. But, though deviation from the normate could be observed and described to the satisfaction of late-nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century researchers, explanations and “cures” continued to evade their grasp. Individuals with physiological differences were left to become medical specimens on public display in freak shows, figures deserving pity for their differences that science could now classify but not truly “fix.”

The supernatural other was being pushed out of belief, not fitting within the framework of evolution and biological study (Monk 8). This was to be the era of the freak show and, slightly later, the extraterrestrial other. After all, the Golden Age of science fiction falls amongst the trailing ends of the freak show’s heyday in the 1940s and with good reason: societal change made freak shows problematic and unpalatable to most consumers (Weinstock 328). It was no longer acceptable to so openly trade in the display of human bodies as freaks, who were now sad figures inspiring pity and sympathy for their unfortunate circumstances.

As such, aliens arose to do the cultural work that human freaks could no longer do. The alien, inherently a fictional creation of an author’s mind, can act as an extension of the freak, a new descriptive container for the racist and xenophobic positions of a society that avoids the criticism garnered by the display of an actual human (Weinstock 330). Aliens can be publically ogled, dissected, and studied. They can be explained through scientific reasoning in a way that the supernatural other cannot, but they are far enough outside the boundaries of accepted reality so as to not evoke sympathy or pity like a freak, a human other.

Weinstock perhaps best explains the relative positions of the human freak and the extraterrestrial other by constructing a continuum from completely human to completely nonhuman. Instead of trying to create

separate categories, he recognizes the overlapping boundaries of the freak, the alien, and the monster as he writes:

on a continuum stretching from human to nonhuman, from a mythical conception of a unified, bounded self to an equally mythical notion of an absolute other, the freak remains contiguous with the human, while the monster exists at a farther remove, at a point approaching the unknowable. A gap exists between the monster and the human, a gap problematically occupied by the freak. (328)

He places the alien within this gap between human and monster as well, but with far more mobility to move along the continuum than the freak, who must always be at least partially human. The alien can be more human, such as the Vulcan people of *Star Trek*, or less human, like the creeping Xenomorph of the *Alien* franchise. To Weinstock, the contemporary alien is the new freak, a figure of otherness that does the same categorical work but with greater flexibility and lacking enough humanity to prevent moral squeamishness.

So where in all of this does *District 9* reside? Humans are easily recognizable as the normates of the film because the film and the quasi-documentary being shown within the film are both shot from the human perspective, calling upon human academics, civilians, and witnesses for interviews. Wikus himself, as the main character, embodies the true normate at the beginning – a straight white male in a happy marriage, a desk worker who seems to possess no extraordinary characteristics for good or bad. Thomson describes this as the “unmarked norm,” a figure who holds power by being completely unremarkable and seemingly neutral in appearance (40). But, on the other hand, there are the extraterrestrial inhabitants of District 9.

The Prawns – as they are negatively called in the film – occupy the extreme on the opposite end of the continuum, approaching entirely nonhuman. They are bipedal and recognizably sentient, which gives them some aspect of familiar humanity, but their design is meant to be distinctly other and separate from the humans of the film. Blomkamp, the film’s director, is quoted as stating, “The creatures should have tentacled faces and hands, designed with practical creature-suit-wearing human performers in mind, distorting the recognizable human form wherever possible” (Hart).

The aliens are a distinctly and visibly separate category from the humans.

Then Wikus begins his horrifically vivid transformation from human to alien, sliding from one extreme to the other. For a majority of the film's action, Wikus occupies a middle ground between human and alien, the space given to the freak.

The boundaries between human and alien are important within the film *District 9*, however. Labels help clearly organize and quickly sort the information that the mind must process into neat bundles. The edges of these categories define the expectations of society for an individual within that category (Thomson 65). A person possesses an expectation for how others will behave based upon their categorization, and they themselves can know the expectations placed on them by others. In *District 9*, the humans know that they are expected to live in the city or around it, that they should have jobs and families and friends. At the same time, aliens should live in District 9 and bow to the authority of Multi-National United (MNU), the shadowy mercenary organization that polices the alien refugees. But such strong, clearly defined borders between social groups allows for alienation.

Alienation is defined by Smith as “the signification of distance or separation between two or more objects” (178). He also calls it a formative part of the human experience, “man’s eternal condition,” and it has existed for as long as people have been labelling and demarcating themselves, their societies, and the surrounding world. This demarcation and alienation is plentiful in *District 9*, which takes its own title from the physical representation of alienation between the humans and the Prawns – District 9, the barricaded and walled-in slums where the Prawns live entirely separate from human infrastructure, culture, and society. The social groups of Prawn and human are equally demarcated so that there can be no confusion between the two; there are vast differences in culture, appearance, and even language between them. There is no point in *District 9* when a human speaks the language of the Prawn or when a Prawn speaks any human language.

This space of alienation, both physical and conceptual, allows for the Prawns to be treated as they are. The Prawns live in revolting conditions, surrounded entirely by trash in ramshackle huts cobbled together from sheets of ragged metal. They have no governing or agricultural power, and they seem to live almost entirely as scavengers even though they occupy

a large area in the heart of the city of Johannesburg. But the Prawns are not people, and people do not enter District 9. The terrible conditions are allowed to continue because those with the power and resources to make a change, the normate human population, do not view the Prawns as sympathetic or familiar creatures at all.

For example, one unnamed civilian shown in the documentary portion of the film states that things would be different if the Prawns had been humans - that he would care if they were members of another race but not if they are just aliens. MNU's own shoot-first tactics reflect this alienated perspective as well. They don't shy away from treating the Prawns with cruelty and crass indifference, often killing indiscriminately or taking pleasure in the death and torment of the Prawns. Koobus Venter, arguably the villain of the film and part of the normate population as well, is one who delights not only in killing Prawns but in hunting Wikus in particular.

However, even as alienation allows for this lack of sympathy and identification, there also comes a desire to embody the differences of the excluded group. Again, this ties back to the cultural work of identification in the historical freak show as described by Thomson. Historical freak show performers were not just freaks that defied the norms of society, but they were also held up as revered celebrities (66). For Americans of the time period, this was largely due to the social value of individuality. Belonging to the normate group made a person comfortable, but part of being normate included having a sense of personal uniqueness. There was nothing more unique and still human than the human freak show performer.

In *District 9*, there is a longing for the otherness of the Prawns at play. The few humans who willingly enter into the District are from a social group known only as the "Nigerians." It is not made clear where this name comes from or if the group members are even Nigerian at all. They are merely identifiable because they have a demonstrated willingness to enter District 9 and barter with the alien population there. However, they not only interact with the Prawns but take part in some aspects of the Prawns' culture – specifically, their military technology and physical capabilities. The Prawns, though they do not demonstrate a particular willingness to use the power at their hands, possess a scattered cache of advanced military weaponry, and the Nigerians often attempt to barter for and possess this technology themselves. The Nigerians also view the Prawns as being

biologically superior, physically stronger and capable of healing from greater damage, traits of which the Nigerians are similarly envious.

In the middle of these alienated social groups, however, lies Wikus. Starting as human, Wikus begins an unintended and reluctant transformation towards the “monster” end of Weinstock’s continuum. This transformation is comparable to the character of the cyborg as described by Warren Smith, wherein two different, alienated social identities compete within one physical body, challenging the accepted limits of the bounded groups (178-179). With this, some might originally see Wikus as a possible utopian bridge between two distinctive cultures. After all, the hybrid nature of Wikus’s own body demonstrates that humans and Prawns are not as dissimilar as the film had originally portrayed them to be. Wikus could be able to unify these groups in a new and universally shared trans-human identity

But, instead, like Smith’s cyborg, these competing identities drive the hybrid character to seek one over the other. Most often, this leads to a non-human or trans-human character trying to be more human – for example, Spock from *Star Trek* learning to embrace the emotions of his human identity over the rational logic of his Vulcan identity. In *District 9*, Wikus violently rejects his transformation and the physical changes it brings when he decides to amputate the arm that has become Prawn-like. Wikus cannot come to terms with being the freak in between, or perhaps transcending these two identities, and instead tries to fit himself into one category through extreme and grotesque measures.

Wikus’s transformation also inspires a similarly violent rejection from the other human characters. In absorbing the otherness of the Prawns – literally embodying the alienation of the film’s society – Wikus forces the people around him to consider the normality of their own natures. Smith talks about this in the context of his cyborg, quoting Michael Beehler’s “Border Patrols”:

This then is the alien as freak. A figure which always “positions itself somewhere between pure familiarity and pure otherness... Taking its positions on the border between identity and difference, it makes that border, articulating it while at the same time disarticulating and confusing the distinctions the border stands for.” (183)

The MNU employees who are aware of what has happened to Wikus are unsympathetic, even willing to sacrifice Wikus in a gruesome manner for the sake of scientific inquiry and capitalist success. The rest of the human population, made marginally aware of Wikus's transformation through a media smear campaign, are repulsed even without seeing his mutated body. The one attempt Wikus makes to live anonymously amongst the human population of Johannesburg is the best example of this.

In the middle portion of the film, Wikus is forced to flee from MNU's interests after it becomes apparent that they wish to dissect his body. He cannot go home, as the company has already positioned forces there, so Wikus robes himself in large clothes and wraps a blanket tightly over his chest to disguise his own mutated arm. This scene is set in a fast-food restaurant shown earlier in the film; the establishment is consistently crowded with customers, and Wikus shuffles in as just another person in the mass. But, while he is in the eatery, a television displays a message calling for his capture.

The report states that Wikus has had sexual interactions with a Prawn and is subsequently suffering from some kind of disease. The crowd around him immediately begins to pull away, despite Wikus's protests and before they even have any evidence of his "diseased" state. The mere accusation of such intergroup contact, a violation of accepted social boundaries, is enough to drive them to reject Wikus as a freak. The actual and inevitable reveal of his extraterrestrial arm sends the crowd into a panicked frenzy, and many flee the restaurant. Wikus himself is forced to leave as MNU's attention is drawn to the area by this commotion.

This scene illustrates Wikus's ostracization from human society, but it also highlights one way that the film *District 9* uses the physical body of the human freak to illustrate the conceptual idea of a breakdown in identity. The city of Johannesburg itself shows this divide in the clearly defined borders of District 9, which separate it from the human areas of the city. But while the physical boundaries of the city might create the illusion of equally distinct social boundaries, Wikus's presence rejects that notion. Van Veuren writes about the role of the physical body in "Tooth and Nail: Anxious Bodies in Neill Blomkamp's *District 9*," saying, "Once Wikus becomes infected with alien DNA, he falls outside of this scheme of classification and his body poses a threat to its very order" (576).

Unlike the Prawns or the humans, there is no physical space for Wikus to occupy. And because it is the human which is normate – more importantly, because the human normate must be unmarked to give it power – the physically marked and trans-human Wikus cannot reside in human spaces. The “loss” of Wikus’s humanity coincides with his removal from the physical infrastructure of human life. One scholarly commentator says this in regard to Wikus’s exile:

The entire world was watching him. He was on every radio station – every image on television. Anything you could find, it had his face on it. So he had nowhere else to go. He ended up hiding in the one place he knew no one would ever come looking for him. (*District 9*)

So Wikus ends up in District 9, a decidedly non-human space, and finds his only ally in Christopher Johnson, the extraterrestrial whose attempts to change the fortune of his people started Wikus’s transformative process.

Part of the danger that Wikus poses to the human population of the film is related to the fear that he inspires in people, the fear that “this could be me.” A similar fear was often evoked by the historical freak show – audiences would flock to see the exhibition of human beings, both fascinated by the pageantry and fearful that they themselves could be so displayed. In *District 9*, Wikus was a human and part of the normate culture, but that changes rather easily over the course of the film. By the end, he has been exiled to an extraterrestrial space, one that is not up to the human standards of living. The poor treatment of the Prawns can be justified because they are not human, but that conviction does not hold when Wikus is violating the boundaries between human and alien. In being forced by Wikus’s hybrid nature to confront the immaterial reality of their own identities, the human population is forced to address the socially constructed and arbitrary divide between Prawn and human. This raises the fear that they might themselves violate the limits of these groups, therein becoming freaks and subsequently forced into a widely despised social class and poorer living conditions.

All of these things contribute to the freakish aspects of Wikus’s circumstances in the movie, but no less important is the value placed on Wikus’s body as a commercial product. The historical freak show commodified human difference, allowing people to control and profit off of

these non-normate bodies, often with a lessened regard for the individuals themselves. Their bodies were of monetary importance more so than their lives, often resulting in many being autopsied and displayed after their deaths, such as in the case of Julia Pastrana and Saartjie Baartman. Similar commercial value is assigned to the bodies of the Prawns and to Wikus in particular.

The most subtle yet pervasive example of this commodification is that the Prawns are branded by MNU. Many throughout the film display the blocky white letters of MNU on their bodies. No explanation is ever given in the film for this branding, but it is present and persistent nonetheless. This draws direct parallels to the idea of branding cattle, marking the Prawns as the lawful property of MNU, despite the fact that they are living creatures and demonstrably sentient ones at that. It also detracts from the idea of Prawns as individual beings by marking them uniformly under one label. MNU also controls the boundaries of District 9 and acts as the only governing force within the District. They are, in practice, a corporate overlord to the Prawn population.

Much like historical freak show performers as well, value is assigned to the bodies of the Prawns instead of their lives. In fact, the Prawns are seen as far more valuable after their deaths than before. The Nigerians and MNU both demonstrate this; the Nigerians actually consume the Prawns as folk remedies, hoping to absorb their physical prowess, while MNU runs an underground laboratory for the dissection of the Prawns. This is in contrast to the living Prawns, who are largely described as a drain on the resources of the government which has poured millions of dollars into refugee efforts. The Prawns are also seen as pests to citizens who accuse the Prawns of rampant theft and point to them as the cause of an outbreak of riots.

Some of this value comes from the alien technology, coded to only work while being handled by an individual with Prawn DNA. MNU hopes to use the bodies of the Prawns to access their technology, and they approach the situation with clinical and detached interest. The Nigerians approach this same problem more holistically by killing and then eating the bodies of the Prawns. It is also reported by unnamed civilians in the documentary scenes of *District 9* that one can eat different portions of the Prawn body to achieve different healing effects. Notably, such consumption is viewed with slight distaste, but it does not bear the same stigma as the act of cannibalism

would – again reinforcing that the Prawns are not human in the eyes of society. These same values are then assigned to Wikus as well.

But while the Prawns are numerous, present in more than enough numbers to satisfy the Nigerians' hunger and MNU's interest, Wikus is entirely unique. This drives up the value placed on his body, as he is not just another Prawn and he is not just another human. His freak status enables him to become a priceless resource to both groups, and they engage in a climactic battle in District 9 as Wikus tries to aid Christopher Johnson in his escape at the end of the film. However, this uniqueness is not the only facet of his increased value. Wikus, in enacting his transformation from human to Prawn, inadvertently accomplishes what both the Nigerians and MNU are hoping to achieve: successful combination of human and Prawn features. Because of this, Wikus is able to use the alien technology and weaponry while other humans cannot, and the value of his physical body is further increased.

Perhaps most interesting in this is that while Wikus's body is ascribed higher and higher commercial value, he loses his social power as one of the normates. In the beginning of the film, as a member of the unmarked normate, Wikus has a good social and economic standing – he is even put in charge of MNU's efforts to relocate the Prawns. But, as Wikus is transformed, thereby becoming a marked and non-normate figure, he loses this power even as he is assigned worth as a specimen. With this loss of power comes a loss of agency; Wikus loses his ability to move freely in his home city, and his actions are restricted by the fear and desire of the normate. It is a compelling exchange of power that follows Wikus from his high-profile corporate position to the obscurity of the Prawns' slums, where he loses most of his identity except for one remaining 'human' trait – the desire to make small crafts for the wife he has been forced to leave behind.

In many ways, then, Wikus's story in *District 9* mirrors the living situations and treatment of many historical freakshow performers. But many critics and viewers of the film are left to question what message *District 9* is trying to impart. Though the film deliberately parallels the South African Apartheid, it is still accused of racist characterization and stereotypical display of both the Prawns and the Nigerians (van Veuren 573). However, the quasi-documentary film style allows for an additional level of self-awareness within the film as commentators can look back on

the story of Wikus and draw attention to the ways in which his treatment was damaging and negative. *District 9* also draws attention to the desperate and desolate living conditions of the subjugated Prawns, pushing the uncomfortable story of racial segregation to the forefront unlike other “going native” stories such as James Cameron’s *Avatar* (Rieder 49).

Ultimately, while neither flawless nor without problems in its portrayal of non-normate figures, *District 9* manages to construct a new breed of science fiction sideshow performer in Wikus van de Merwe, and the story of his transformation has had a definite impact on audiences. Though about aliens, *District 9* is inescapably a freak show in and of itself, featuring clashing identities, horrific transformation, and the commodification of physical bodies. It is just as Smith concludes in his article, “Identification with the alien as freak is always present if, sometimes, sensed only obliquely. This figure exists in a semi-defined space between fear and attraction” (187). The freak show is there in Johannesburg with Wikus as its star performer, forever immortalized in this film.

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Princesses or Monsters?: An Analysis of the Role of the Freak Show in *Toddlers & Tiaras*

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INTRODUCTION

Fake tans and the smell of hairspray fill the hotel rooms at a glitzy child beauty pageant. Mothers yell about being late while their children—the contestants—drink Red Bull and eat copious amounts of candy to help them stay awake during the grueling day. It all culminates in an hour-long television show called *Toddlers & Tiaras*. Aired first in January 2009, the show lasted for six seasons with a total of one hundred and seven episodes after it went off the air in October 2013 (Miet).

One of TLC's many reality shows, *Toddlers & Tiaras* follows three contestants as they prepare for and compete in a child beauty pageant. The pageant upon which each episode focuses and the contestants it follows change with each episode, but there are often contestants who have made several appearances on the show, notably Alana Thompson, who even inspired the TLC spin-off reality show *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*.

In a typical episode of *Toddlers*, which had an average of 1.3 million viewers (Miet), half of the episode is spent depicting how each child gets ready for a beauty pageant. This includes interviews with both the child and parent(s) interspersed with footage of contestants practicing routines, getting costumes and dresses ready, getting their nails done, and some even applying spray tans. Most of these contestants are between the ages of two and nine. The other half of the episode focuses on the pageant itself: the arrival of the families, the preparation, the competition, and finally, the

Abstract

This essay explores a modern-day incarnation of the historical freak show: the child beauty pageant reality show *Toddlers & Tiaras*. The author draws connections between both freak shows and *Toddlers'* use of the concepts of normalcy, display, and consent, which ultimately reveals that shows such as these have a detrimental effect on how audiences view young girls, and the contestants themselves may feel negative about their self-worth and femininity after participating in pageants.

results. Contestants can win a multitude of awards; the top titles often come with cash or savings bonds as prizes, some up to \$10,000.

While seen as an entertaining show by many, notably its millions of viewers, *Toddlers & Tiaras* has also accumulated a host of critics, many of which note its strong resemblance to the freak show. The historical freak show became popular as the Victorian public was fascinated by those who did not fit into the social norms of the time. The so-called “normal folks” were able to compare themselves to the freaks and feel better about the fact that they were not as “abnormal” as those on display. Rosemarie Garland Thomson, a leading scholar in disability studies, writes, “The freak simultaneously testified to the physical and ideological normalcy of the spectator....This determining relation between observer and observed was mutually defining and yet unreciprocal, as it imposed on the freak the silence, anonymity, and passivity characteristic of objectification” while on display (62). While the young girls in *Toddlers* are also being put on display, they are being presented at the other end of the spectrum: the ideal. Three-year-olds wear copious amounts of makeup and fake teeth while eight-year-olds get spray tans and perform “sexy” dance routines in skimpy costumes—all to present themselves as perfect according to societal beauty standards.

While this aspect of *Toddlers* may seem to be the opposite of freak shows, Lennard Davis explains that, when someone is *so* ideal—or so far on the ideal side of the spectrum—it may actually serve to make them appear freakish to their more normal audiences (4). This aspect of *Toddlers & Tiaras* is part of its intense popularity—the audience cannot believe that young girls are able to emulate beauty ideals typically reserved for teenagers and young women.

The other popular criticism that the show receives is the argument that it unnecessarily sexualizes young girls. From the contestant wearing Julia Roberts’s prostitute costume from *Pretty Woman* to a three-year-old wearing Madonna’s iconic cone bra onstage, the show is no stranger to controversy (“The Five Biggest Controversies to Hit ‘Toddlers and Tiaras’”). In these types of pageants, young girls are expected to embody the same type of sexuality that society expects from twenty-year-olds, which can not only cause psychological damage in the self-esteem of contestants, but also detrimentally influence the way in which society perceives girls (Tamer).

In order to further explore the attitudes promoted by child beauty

pageants—specifically those featured on *Toddlers and Tiaras*—I will conduct a close analysis of two *Toddlers* episodes that epitomize the show’s similarities—as well as some differences—to the freak show and draw conclusions about how these attitudes affect the show’s audience and its contestants. I argue that the television show *Toddlers & Tiaras* functions similarly to the historical freak show, which influences the audience’s perception of normalcy, while affecting contestants’ self-image with regards to femininity and sexuality.

HISTORY OF THE BEAUTY PAGEANT

The modern beauty pageant was originally the brainchild of none other than P.T. Barnum, considered the father of the American freak show. Barnum’s inspiration came from the European medieval May Day celebrations, which often included competitions involving the selection of queens who represented the innocence of young girls. The first of Barnum’s pageants was held in England in 1881 and was well received in the United States (Friedman). The American version of May Day involved the selection of “women to serve as symbols of bounty and community ideals” (“People & Events: Origins of the Beauty Pageant”).

Beginning in the 1850s, Barnum held “national contests” where “dogs, chickens, flowers, and even children were displayed and judged for paying audiences” (“People & Events: Origins of the Beauty Pageant”). Baby parades and baby contests grew to be a popular form of entertainment with one parade in 1893 drawing 30,000 spectators. By the 1929 Coney Island Baby Parade, the number of spectators had grown to 500,000. However, because of the morals and values of the Victorian era, when Barnum announced a similar competition to find beautiful women, it was a huge flop—the respectable women of the time would not publicly display themselves (Friedman).

To combat this problem, Barnum pioneered a new system of competition: one of photogenic beauty. Women could send in pictures of themselves, which would be displayed in Barnum’s museum and voted on by museum-goers. For decades, this type of contest was widely used to boost morale: “Civic leaders...held newspaper contests to choose women that represented the spirit of their locales” (“People & Events: Origins of the Beauty Pageant”) to incentivize settlers and businesses to come to their cities

and towns.

As attitudes about female display changed over time, pageants became a more permissible form of entertainment. By the twentieth century, resorts held regular pageants as a type of amusement for the ever-expanding middle class. In “an effort to lure tourists to stay past Labor Day,” the first-ever Miss America pageant was held in Atlantic City in 1921 (“People & Events: Origins of the Beauty Pageant”).

Fast forward to the 1960s, and the modern child beauty pageant was in full swing. Known as “American-style beauty pageants,” the Little Miss America contest, which searched for “the most beautiful girls in the world!” (Miet) was a popular event for over a decade. From the sixties to the eighties, the child competitions focused on natural beauty, adding sub-competitions including categories titled “party wear, photogenic, and talent” (Miet). As competitiveness in child beauty pageants and the desire to outdo the other contestants grew, young girls were encouraged to wear caked-on makeup, fake eyelashes, expensive dresses, and hair extensions. When *Toddlers & Tiaras* debuted in 2008, this type of “glitz” pageant skyrocketed to an even higher popularity. In 2013, during the sixth season of *Toddlers*, the children’s pageant industry was valued at \$5 billion with more than five thousand pageants being held in the U.S. each year (Miet).

ANALYSIS

To further understand the connection between beauty pageants and the historical freak show, I analyzed two episodes of *Toddlers & Tiaras*. One episode called “Starz-N-Glitz: Stone Age” follows two-year-olds Charli and Maddisyn-Rae and three-year-old Savannah as they compete in Charlotte, North Carolina; the other episode on which I focus—“Universal Royalty: Grand Nationals”—showcases Lola, age three, and Hailey and Dianely, both age seven, at a national pageant in Austin, Texas. Through these analyses, I hope to illuminate the similarities, as well as some differences, regarding normalcy, display, and consent between freak shows and child “glitz” beauty pageants.

Normalcy

In his essay *Constructing Normalcy*, Lennard Davis writes that “we live in a world of norms” (3), and we are constantly comparing ourselves to

others in order to determine if we do indeed fit into the mold of what is considered “normal.” Davis argues that the idea of “the norm” first entered American consciousness in the mid-1800s, and thus accompanied the rise of the freak show, which helped the general public to define what was normal. In the 1830s, the concept of the “Average Man” motivated people to strive for normalcy (Fender and Muzaffar).

This notion is effectively demonstrated by the normalcy bell curve. This bell curve (Figure 1) is a symmetrical curve that peaks in the very middle of its variables. The ends of the bell curve represent a trait that occurs very rarely. In other words, when applied to humans, the majority of people fall in the middle—these are who society considers “normal” because they have flaws but are “normal enough” to be accepted, according to societal norms and expectations. On one end of the bell curve, there are the outliers who would be considered “freaks”—those who are considered so abnormal that there is no way they can fit in with those who fall near the middle of the bell curve. The other end of the bell curve encompasses people who are seen as “perfect” or nearly perfect. In other words, the “normal” people are expected to have some flaws, but, when someone looks or acts in a manner that is considered close to perfection—according to societal norms he or she shifts towards the “ideal” end of the bell curve, isolating him or herself from what is considered normal. Therefore, there are a large number of people who would be considered “normal” while only a small percentage of the population falls into the categories on either end of the bell curve—freakish or ideal.

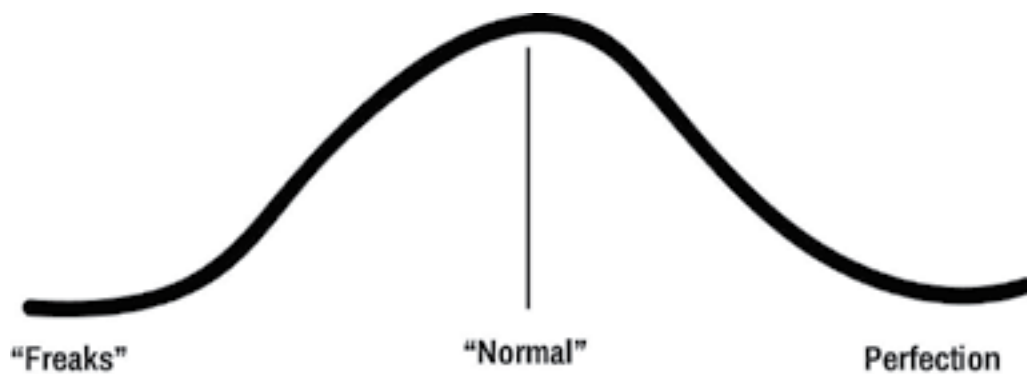


Figure 1: Normalcy Bell Curve

Davis asserts that, eventually, just being “normal”—that is, falling in the middle of the bell curve—was not good enough for some; rather, they focused on inching further and further towards perfection, towards the “ideal.” This is the notion that is evident in *Toddlers & Tiaras*. Each episode depicts “glitz” beauty pageants, which means that contestants, no matter the age, often wear fake hair, lots of makeup, fake nails, and extremely expensive outfits and dresses, just so that they can be chosen as the most beautiful and most perfect girl onstage. This notion of what is considered perfection, of course, is largely connected with femininity. Because it is hyper-femininity that is valued in American society, these young girls attempt to follow that trend.

Both episodes of *Toddlers & Tiaras* that I examined showed the six contestants’ bedrooms, all of which were bright pink and showcased their crowns and sashes from past wins. This indicates to the girls that, not only is it “correct” to be extremely feminine, but also that pageants—and beauty ideals—are quite important. In fact, the most significant component of a pageant is the Beauty Competition. Both pageant directors described what this competition entailed: a beautiful face, overall great appearance, and a wonderful personality (“Starz-N-Glitz: Stone Age”).

Child beauty pageants are explicit in communicating to their competitors what the ideal notion of beauty is. All the girls in the episodes wear fake hair, lots of makeup, and get manicures or wear fake nails. The older contestants, Hailey and Dianley, both seven, had their eyebrows shaved and plucked, and Dianley’s mom spray tanned her daughter. While she is getting her eyebrows done, Hailey says, “If something hurts me, my mom always says, ‘Beauty is pain’ because if you want to be beautiful, it has to take pain” (“Universal Royalty: Grand Nationals”). Unfortunately, this is not a rarity. Many young girls who participate in these pageants believe that they must dramatically change their appearances in order to be perfect and thus win the competition.

What is important to note, however, is that *all* the contestants perform as essentially false versions of themselves. In attempting to reach the ideal of beauty, they believe that they must put on fake hair and nails and do their makeup. But because every contestant does this—that is, no competitor is able to win without spending hours getting ready—this also means that the standard of beauty those on *Toddlers* are attempting to reach is unattainable

without such props. Judges expect a certain “look” that they know is not natural or normal; the ideal of perfection for which the girls strive is an illusion.

Their outfits are also indicative of this quest for perfection. All the girls’ “beauty dresses” are short, frilly, and sparkly—traits most associated with feminine clothing choices. In “Starz-N-Glitz: Stone Age,” a facet of the competition includes “Stone Age Wear.” The judges are looking for “creative costumes, great hair and makeup, and cool routines,” explains pageant director Carla Smith. Two-year-old Charli dressed in a pink two-piece outfit as Pebbles from *The Flintstones*, and Savannah’s costume was that of Eve and was a two-piece made of leaves, while Maddisyn-Rae wore a two-piece dinosaur costume (“Starz-N-Glitz: Stone Age”). These “girly” outfits worn by contestants further speak to the norm of femininity that the girls are trying to portray—by showing off skin in small two-piece outfits, the girls are attempting to fit into the feminine role that society has assigned to them.

In the other episode analyzed, there were additional talent and swimwear competitions. While Lola was fully covered for her talent routine, Dianely and Hailey both wore two-piece outfits for their performances. The swimsuit competition is perhaps most indicative of the pageant’s emphasis on perfection. Though the judges would never take off points for a younger contestant’s body type, the director of the pageant, Annetta Hill, explained that for contestants ages six and older, “we want them to be more elegant and classy [than the younger girls]” (“Universal Royalty: Grand Nationals”). Essentially, the six-year-olds are expected to have grace similar to the twenty-year-old women they are competing against.

One of the contestants, Dianely, has a unique problem when it comes to her body. At the beginning of the episode, Dianley explains that she loves to do gymnastics, but her mother, Fransoly, says, “Her muscles started developing too much and she didn’t look right in a beauty dress... so we’re taking a break from gymnastics, and her body is back to normal” (“Universal Royalty: Grand Nationals”). Fransoly’s use of the word “normal” while describing her no-longer-muscular child goes to show how pageants encourage a traditionally feminine look from all their competitors.

This analysis may seem quite disconnected from the historical freak show: these girls are striving for perfection at the opposite end of the spectrum. However, it is important to note that if a person becomes too

ideal, they can still appear freakish, especially to the so-called “normal” people who are passing judgement. Those who fall in the middle of the normalcy bell curve continue to judge the outliers, whether they fall on the “freak” or “perfect” ends of the curve. In this case, because such young girls are expected to wear revealing clothing while drastically changing their appearance, they appear to the audience of *Toddlers & Tiaras* as not “normal.” Joshua Gamson writes that many reality shows have this effect on audiences. These types of shows cause spectators to see the subjects of the shows on television as different from the average viewer. This causes the viewers to compare themselves to and simultaneously want to separate themselves from the television subjects.

These notions of comparison and separation are what make *Toddlers & Tiaras* quite similar to the freak show. In the case of *Toddlers*, however, the show communicates that young girls are expected to look and move like twenty-year-old women, which is what makes them freakish. While freak shows and *Toddlers* are found at opposite ends at the normalcy bell curve, the message received by the middle “normal” viewers is the same: “Thank goodness I am not like them!”

Display

It goes without saying that display is a large part of *Toddlers & Tiaras* and beauty pageants as a whole. In this case, not only are the contestants and parents on display for the reality show, but the girls are also being put on display to be evaluated by judges and other audience members who attend the pageants. This bears a striking resemblance to the freak show. Freaks were historically put on display solely to be examined and judged by members of the community. Further, many freaks exaggerated their physical differences or changed their appearances in order to make themselves stand out even more. For example, a group of indigenous Filipinos called the Igorots were brought to the United States for anthropological purposes. While originally put on display by the American government for educational reasons, the Igorots quickly became popular because they were touted as “dog eaters” and “‘true’ savagery, with all the trimmings” (Vaughan 226). The appearances and performances of the Igorots were altered by their handlers simply to get a crowd in the door rather than to educate spectators.

Child beauty pageants include immense changes in the children's appearances as well as a performative aspect: in the *Starz-N-Glitz: Stone Age* pageant, contestants performed dance routines while dressed in "Stone Age Wear," while at the *Universal Royalty* pageant, competitors performed talent and swimwear routines, both of which were highly performative. During all these routines, contestants are expected to smile; Hailey's family constantly yelled "Smile!" to her while she was onstage performing. While performing beauty routines, all contestants made gestures that would most likely be described as "cutesy," such as waving, blowing kisses, and batting their eyelashes. These gestures, as well as constant smiling, have become ways to perform stereotypically feminine behaviors for the judges and show off what they think the people judging them want to see.

But these routines do not always go smoothly. Though the contestants are young, they are expected to have practiced in order for their routines to go off without a hitch. If this does not happen, it can detrimentally affect the scores of the contestants. Maddisyn-Rae, for example, did not do her *Stone Age Wear* routine correctly, and her dad described it as "terrible" while her mom said it was "a definite fail in my book" ("*Starz-N-Glitz: Stone Age*"), showing the emphasis on performative display in beauty pageants.

Just like historical freak shows, the contestants want to present the best versions of themselves. For those working in the freak show, that meant they needed to be as "abnormal" as possible. For the girls on *Toddlers*, this means they must appear as "perfect" for the judges, who only see a narrow part of who these girls are. While performing the beauty routine, for example, the emcee describes appearance (Charli, for example, has "blonde hair and chocolate brown eyes" ("*Starz-N-Glitz: Stone Age*")), hobbies, and fun facts, such as favorite food. One thing I noticed in the description of Dianely is that she was described as enjoying "cheerleading and, of course, makeup and pageants" ("*Universal Royalty: Grand Nationals*"). Her love of gymnastics was not mentioned, even though, at the beginning of the episode, she expressed that she would love to be on the Olympic gymnastics team. Instead, her hobbies were written—most likely by her mother—to reflect interests that are desirable in the pageant world, most likely because they are associated with feminine traits.

Consent

Contestants on *Toddlers & Tiaras* cannot enter the competition by themselves—rather, they often have a strong driving force in the form of a parent (usually a mother) pushing them to enter in and win pageants. There is no doubt that the pageant world is quite intense, but it brings up a gray area about whether consent by competitors is required to participate in the competitions. Many contestants do not really get to have a say in whether or not they want to compete, and there are most likely some competitors who believe that they must compete in pageants, lest they let down their mothers.

This gray area of consent is also prevalent in freak shows. One of the most well-known human anomalies, for example, was Saartjie Baartman, who came from Africa and was exhibited in England for her “greatly enlarged rump” typical of San women from the area (Lindfors 208). Known as the Hottentot Venus, Baartman “testified in [*sic*] behalf of her managers, saying that she had freely consented to exhibit her person in England, was earning good money, and wanted the show to go on. There was some doubt that she fully understood the nature of the contract she had entered into” (Lindfors 210). Because Baartman was brought to England from Africa and did not speak English as her first language, many believe that she was manipulated and told that she was signing a contract with different terms than those that were actually included in the document.

These consent issues are evident in my analysis of *Toddlers*. Before competitor Charli was born, for example, her mother, Samantha, would enter their pet dog into dog beauty pageants. She says that “Charli was just next in line. She didn’t have a choice” (“Starz-N-Glitz: Stone Age”). Never during the episode, though, does she actually ask her daughter if she likes or wants to participate in pageants. Three-year-old Savannah is another story. She does not hold back when talking about her dislike of pageants, saying that she would much rather play hockey with her dad than spend a weekend competing. When her mom, Natasha, says, “I thought you wanted to go to the pageant,” Savannah replies, “No”; when the producer asks if she is excited to go to the pageant, Savannah shakes her head. When she is asked if she would rather go play hockey, Savannah nods. Though Savannah’s mother constantly says things like “[a]s long as she wants to do it, I’ll do whatever it takes,” or “[s]he loves being onstage!,” she does not actually listen

to her daughter, who does not want to be a pageant princess (“Starz-N-Glitz: Stone Age”).

Another issue that relates to consent is money. The pageant entry fees are not cheap, nor are the dresses, hair, and makeup. This means that the parents who pay for the competitions put immense pressure on their daughters to perform well, especially considering that there is usually money involved for the winners of the top prizes. Savannah’s mother even takes on extra jobs working as a clown in order to pay for pageants and constantly reminds her daughter of this fact, saying, “I didn’t dress up like a clown for a runner-up title” (“Starz-N-Glitz: Stone Age”). Dianely’s mom confesses, “I’m very competitive. If you’re in it, you have to do anything to win” (“Universal Royalty: Grand Nationals”). If anything, it seems as though the parents have more at stake than their children.

The parents of competitors act much like the freakshow handlers. They completely control their children’s routines and outfits and dictate that the girls should love pageants—recall that Dianely’s mother forced her to quit gymnastics because it was making her body type “not right” for a beauty dress. Further, each parent is heavily invested in the competitions—often more so than their daughters—just as freakshow handlers often paid large amounts of money to get the freaks and put them on display in the first place. In Baartman’s case, she was made to perform even when she was clearly sick. One observer noted, “She [Baartman] was extremely ill, and the man insisted on her dancing...the poor creature pointed to her throat and to her knees as if she felt pain in both, pleading with tears that he would not force her compliance” (qtd. in Lindfors 209). If she did not perform, the freakshow handler would lose money, which is why he would force performers to exhibit themselves, regardless of whether or not they wanted it. In their eyes, it was up to the human anomalies to make back the money the handlers had paid for them, or, in the case of *Toddlers*, to win.

One difference between freakshow handlers and the mothers on *Toddlers*, however, is the way that they fit into the freak show. Handlers presented themselves publicly as “normal” people, just like the spectators coming to see the show. On the other hand, the portrayal of the mothers and their relationships with their daughters on *Toddlers & Tiaras* indicates a demonization and, in a sense, freakification of the mothers as well. The stereotypical pageant mom spends large amounts of time and money to

drastically change her daughter's look and put her on stage to be judged nearly solely on appearance, and the moms are portrayed as egotistical and over-the-top. In fact, moms are often depicted in the show as a hindrance "to their daughters' chance of success" (Demanjee 467).

The biggest tie between these pageants and the freak show, however, is the issue of consent itself. Because parents have the option to make choices for their children, *Toddlers* often emphasizes a case like Savannah's, in which the child does not want to perform, but her mother forces her to. While some performers such as Baartman believed that they were freely consenting, many freaks in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries felt as though they had no other choice but to perform in the freak show. This was especially the case for performers who had physical disabilities. Brigham Fordham explains the traditional freakshow justification for display: "It is assumed that persons with exceptional bodies are destined for disgrace and unemployment due to their unusual physical characteristics. The freak show 'discovers' and saves these people by giving them what is assumed to be the only possible kind of productive employment and identity" (12). Especially in the Victorian era, there were fewer opportunities for those who were physically handicapped, and performing in a freak show seemed to be the only option, which is similar to the young girls on *Toddlers* who are trapped into participating in pageants because they do not think they have any other choice.

The fact that *Toddlers & Tiaras* is a reality show, though, adds another aspect to the consent issue in the form of exploitation. Christopher Cianci reports that children who star in reality shows often receive very little legal protection with regards to how much they can work and what they can be made to do. Not only does the *Toddlers* crew follow contestants around at the pageant, but they also come into the children's homes, spending a great deal of time interviewing the family. Because of the lack of laws in place protecting children on reality shows, the producers can effectively exploit the drama and tantrums of these children while not technically receiving their consent.

IMPLICATIONS

The real question to ask after analyzing *Toddlers and Tiaras* and comparing and contrasting the television program and the freak show is:

why does it all matter? Clearly, the reality show's ties to the historical freak show have many implications, the two most important of which are self-image and sexualization.

One could argue that *Toddlers & Tiaras* is the result of the world in which we live—that is, the result of a world that is not only grossly mediated, but also one in which media has a large impact on what society sees as acceptable. Jessica Bennett notes the impact that shows such as *Toddlers* can have on its predominantly female audience: “Reared on reality TV and celebrity makeovers, girls as young as Marleigh [age 2] are using beauty products earlier, spending more and still feeling worse about themselves.” She goes on to explain that today's culture has come to make “the girls of *Toddlers & Tiaras* look ordinary” (Bennett).

Not only are girls trained to focus on their appearance because of these shows, but they are also expected to do so at an increasingly younger age. Instead of taking the time to do what was formerly considered a “normal” activity for a pre-teen—such as playing soccer or going to the mall—the new “normal” is spending countless hours scrutinizing the way they look and the ways that they can change it, including changing hair style and color, getting nails done, and, for some, even surgery. Because girls as young as those depicted on *Toddlers & Tiaras* are making these major appearance changes, older girls who may watch the show feel as though they must also adhere to that standard of beauty.

This effect on the self-worth of young girls is not limited just to the audience of pageants but is often even more manifested in the contestants themselves. Because pageants are so involved and contestants often compete for many years, the ideals of beauty can become skewed, starting when pageant princesses are young girls. The so-called “rituals” of female beauty that contestants must undergo “speak to an ideal, heteronormative and consumption-based femininity” (Demanjee 465). In other words, the perception of beauty that is held by contestants on *Toddlers* is most likely an idea of femininity that is unattainable. Yet, because of the time spent performing in pageants and attempting to attain this ideal beauty, competitors feel as though there is something wrong when they are not able to do so, which harms their self-esteem.

The second major implication that stems from the popularity of a show like *Toddlers & Tiaras* relates to how society at large perceives

young girls. In my analysis of the show, girls were judged heavily on their appearances, and, in competitions other than Beauty, they often wore two-piece outfits, and their hair and makeup matched that of a twenty-year-old woman much more than an eight-year-old girl. Further, in their quest for beauty, the girls had their eyebrows shaved and were spray tanned to compete with young adults.

In fact, in both episodes I have analyzed, the title of Ultimate Grand Supreme—the top title that a contestant can win and one that any age can receive—went to girls who were eighteen- and twenty-years-old. This, of course, is not surprising, as the women who won undoubtedly had more experience than the toddlers they were competing against. What is surprising, however, is the fact that the young contestants featured on *Toddlers* would be expected to compete with contestants who were ten years older.

This points to the unnecessary sexualization of the girls on the show and in pageants. A major reason that contestants put on the hair and heavy makeup is not only to attempt to attain an ideal of beauty but to attain a beauty that is expected of young women, not young girls. Additionally, as Demajnee points out, sexuality has become “strategic for contestants, who quickly learn that they are judged positively on their ability to mimic the sexualised [*sic*], girlish poses in their routines, such as wiggling their hips, flicking up their legs as they strut off stage, blowing kisses and pouting” (465). Because of the young age of the girls on the show, this “sexy” behavior coupled with revealing outfits create an unfamiliar dichotomy between childish innocence and intense sexuality. However, as Demanjee goes on to explain, “Performances [are] dismissed as harmless, fun, part of the normalised [*sic*] play and mimicry of children, as opposed to alternative readings such as the exploitation and sexualisation [*sic*] of children” (465).

CONCLUSION

Through my analysis, it is clear that *Toddlers & Tiaras* bears a strange and troubling resemblance to the historical freak show. It is evident that the program shares similarities to the historical freak show in terms of normalcy, display, and consent. Though the girls displayed on *Toddlers* are seen as freakish because of their quest to become the “ideal woman,” the fact that society ogles, ostracizes, and sexualizes them still presents troubling

implications.

Many would like to think that our society has progressed past the historical freak shows, and the reasons that they existed in the first place. The sad reality, however, is that the freak show has merely been reconfigured to take the form of reality shows such as *Toddlers & Tiaras*. While society will always look for a group outside the norm—be they on the grotesque or ideal end of the spectrum—the effects of reality shows are often harmful and long-lasting, whether for the subject of the show or the audience and larger society who pass judgement. Reality shows are not going away anytime soon, but it is important to remember that the programs only portray a small sliver of the real lives of contestants. They, too, just want to be accepted.

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The Unseen Fat Woman: Fatness, Stigma, and Invisibility in Mrs. Wolowitz from *The Big Bang Theory*

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“Difference demands display. Display demands difference.” - Mitchell and Snyder, 55

This epigraph strikes at the core of the historical and cultural phenomenon that is the freak show. As an institution that derives its attraction from difference, the freak show displays individuals who are not considered “normal.” But the function of displaying difference goes beyond mere entertainment. Freak shows existed as a form of societal self-definition for the people who paid to gain entrance to the shows. Society defined itself by projecting upon the freak show all of the undesirable traits and the concerns they had about the ever-changing world. In particular, the exhibition of fat women in the freak show embodied spectators’ fears about losing control of their bodies, represented as gaining weight. By contrasting themselves with the fat women, they were given an opportunity to identify who they were, or as disability studies scholar Rosemarie Garland Thomson calls it, “an opportunity to formulate the self in terms of what it is not” (59). As a result, the freak show codified the idea that fatness was abnormal, unhealthy, and undesirable; and in contrast, it reinforced the notions that thinness was normal, healthy, and ideal. And behind the “unhealthy” nature of the fat body lies a belief that the fat body is out of control as a result of excessive behaviors.

Abstract

In *The Big Bang Theory*, Mrs. Wolowitz is the only fat character on the show but is also the only character to never have her entire body shown to viewers. This essay analyzes the implications of removing the fat body from visual displays and how the show situates Mrs. Wolowitz within the contexts of the freak show, fat stigma, and corrective health narratives, which ultimately demands that fat bodies never be displayed to viewers.

In the end, the main attraction is undoubtedly the sight of the fat body. People did not pay to hear a description of a fat person; they came to see the fat person in the flesh. A counterexample of the displaying of fatness occurs in the modern CBS sitcom, *The Big Bang Theory*. The television show focuses on a group of four nerds who work at CalTech: Sheldon Cooper and Leonard Hofstadter, two physicists; Raj Koothrappali, an astrophysicist; and Howard Wolowitz, an aerospace engineer. The show follows their nerdy lives as they interact with their neighbor, Penny, an aspiring actress, and numerous other characters. Out of all of the characters in the show, there is only one character who is fat and one character whose body is never shown; that character is Howard's mother, Mrs. Wolowitz.

Since, in the freak show, the visual display of the fat body and the denigration of the fat body are indistinguishable, it may seem that intentionally avoiding the display of Mrs. Wolowitz's fat body would cease the freakification of fatness. It might seem that the absence of the fat body would provide fat people with more control over the construction of their own identity.

However, in this paper I argue that merely not showing the fat body does *not* accomplish this task. First, in applying research on social stigma and an analysis of the historical context shaping cultural attitudes about fatness, I demonstrate that Mrs. Wolowitz's fat body, and fatness in general, is still denigrated despite the absence of a visible fat body. Second, by examining narratives in general and the medical narrative within the show, I prove that the show moves beyond merely degrading the fat body and dictates that fatness must be controlled and ultimately corrected. Third, by exploring Jeannine Gailey's theory of hyper(in)visibility, which is the paradox of the fat body being both metaphorically invisible and actually visible at the same time, I demonstrate that the absence of Mrs. Wolowitz's fat body in the show creates a clear message that the fat body is so "unruly" and "ugly" that it does not even deserve to be looked at, that it should be erased from public view. I believe it is impossible to reclaim fat identity when the fat body is *not present* and when popular sitcoms subtly state that it *should not be present*. Instead, I believe that the only way to celebrate fat identity and critique negative attitudes about fatness is to allow fat individuals to create their own identities and control the display of their bodies on their own conditions.

SOCIAL ATTITUDES ABOUT FATNESS

When a fat lady or man was exhibited in the freak show, his or her body consumed the identity of that person. Viewers saw a fat body and the negative characteristics they associated with it. In *The Big Bang Theory*, despite the absence of Mrs. Wolowitz's fat body, her fat identity still consumes her character and makes fatness her defining characteristic. This happens because the social stigma behind fatness is so pervasive that it extends beyond the visual body.

According to Erving Goffman, a stigma is a personal attribute that is “deeply discrediting” due to societal attitudes regarding it, attitudes that can lead to social shunning (257). He states that “an individual who might have been received easily in ordinary social intercourse possesses a trait that can obtrude itself upon attention and turn those of us whom he meets away from him, breaking the claim that his other attributes have on us” (257). He stresses, however, that stigma is created in social interactions, and the stigma itself is created from the attitudes and perceptions of people towards the stigmatized individual and not from the trait itself.

Among Goffman's three types of stigma, the type that pertains to the fat body is “abominations of the body,” or “various physical deformities” that are visible to others and are difficult to cover up (257). In the case of a fat person, fatness is a physical trait that cannot be disguised; and, according to Goffman's theory, fatness becomes a stigma because of the social attitudes of the people who interact with the fat person. The effect of this on the fat person is insurmountable: the body has the potential to consume the identity of the person, creating a singular identity concentrated on the fat body itself. Any interaction with a fat person, then, is tainted by the stigma that others impose upon that person, denying the fat person a chance of cultivating an acceptable position in society.

One reason that fatness is so stigmatized is that social attitudes about fatness have long existed in American culture. Amy Erdman Farrell studies postcards from the nineteenth century to determine the social attitudes toward fatness. Farrell notices that, in the beginning and middle of that century, fatness was first a positive characteristic. She states that a “hefty body” was a marker of both wealth and health, signifying that a person had the money to feed themselves properly (27). However, she discovers there were other perceptions of fatness. Many times, growing businesses and

corrupt politicians would be depicted as fat; but she notes that the fat person was not perceived as a physical or moral threat. Instead, the fat body was a way to represent the corruption in the political system; the negative attitudes were directed at the politicians, not the fat body (31). A final depiction of a fat person was a spectacle in the form of an extremely fat person; however, the stigma here was not on the fat person himself but rather on the “uniqueness” of the individual (32).

However, starting in the late nineteenth century, Farrell notices a shift toward social attitudes that viewed fatness as a negative trait. She believes that there were multiple factors that contributed to this changing viewpoint. On one side, remnants of Protestant thinking portrayed fatness as a sign of a “deficient body” resulting from the failure to control one’s desires and appetites (45). On the other side, as theories of evolution began to circulate, ideas about “stages of civilization” cast certain types of bodies as inferior based on multiple criteria – racial difference, gender differences, sexual differences, and differences in body types: thinness vs. fatness (60). By the beginning of the twentieth century, people already believed that fatness was a negative characteristic; within the minds of Americans, the “connotations of fatness”—that the fat person was gluttonous, lazy, stupid, and sinful—were already planted (34).

Today, these attitudes about fatness have become so ingrained in our minds that Mrs. Wolowitz’s character cannot escape them, even without her body being displayed. Throughout the show, the single defining feature of Mrs. Wolowitz is her fatness. There is emphasis on her eating habits: in one episode we learn that Mrs. Wolowitz has to eat Oreos during her bath (“The Staircase Implementation”), and in another episode we hear that Mrs. Wolowitz’s hand is stuck in the garbage disposal because she won’t let go of a “perfectly good chicken leg” (“The Habitation Configuration”).

Besides eating, her extreme physical size is stressed so much that it freakifies her. In one episode, after Mrs. Wolowitz has been injured, Howard jokes about getting a forklift to help his mother get up the stairs (“The Gorilla Dissolution”). In another episode, Mrs. Wolowitz has what is presumably a heart attack while in the bathroom. When Howard tells his friends that he lifted her to the car, Penny is astounded: “You picked up your mother? Her own legs are barely able to do that.” Howard, trying to find a plausible explanation, says, “I was filled with adrenaline. It happens to be

how women lift cars off babies.” Penny, looking at him incredulously, says that it would be easier to lift a car than lift Mrs. Wolowitz (“The Engagement Reaction”). There are countless other episodes in which she is described as being big enough to hide behind her shadow (“The Bakersfield Expedition”) as well as being so big that she appears in every single picture in Howard and Bernadette’s wedding album (“The Parking Spot Escalation”). This not only presents fatness as a comedic element, but it also freakifies Mrs. Wolowitz by reducing her identity into a single issue—her fatness—that marks her as other. When we focus our attention on her, we focus solely on her “abnormal” body size; her humanity has been replaced by the size of her body and food intake.

The othering of Mrs. Wolowitz is so severe that she herself has internalized the idea that fatness is a state of being out-of-control and physically undesirable. In “The Hawking Excitation,” Sheldon is helping Mrs. Wolowitz try on a dress for Howard’s wedding. As he is trying to push her body into the dress and zip her up, Sheldon says, “If I squeeze you any tighter, you may turn into a diamond.” Mrs. Wolowitz responds—one of the only times she actually addresses her large size head on: “You’re right, who am I kidding? You should have seen me when I was young, Sheldon. The fellas used to line up and bring me boxes of candy. Why did I eat it all?” (“The Hawking Excitation”). First, this quote from Mrs. Wolowitz directly links excessiveness and overeating with fatness, drawing a connection between the two and reinforcing the notion that to be fat is to be out of control. Second, this quote implies that, once Mrs. Wolowitz became fat, she no longer had “fellas” lining up with boxes of chocolate. This suggests that fatness marred her character and made her “ugly”; she essentially believes that fatness makes her undesirable. But, most importantly, these ideas are no longer simply social attitudes; they are now intrinsic and reciprocal attitudes that Mrs. Wolowitz holds about herself. Instead of being merely the recipient of social stigma regarding her body, Mrs. Wolowitz is both the sender and receiver. And so, the absence of her body from the show does nothing to prevent her from being stigmatized and othered.

NARRATIVES OF CORRECTION

In *The Big Bang Theory*, there are many narratives introduced in the beginning of the show that get resolved throughout the course of the show.

For example, in the beginning, Sheldon, Leonard, Howard, and Raj are all single; currently, in its ninth season, all four of them are in relationships. But, when we consider Mrs. Wolowitz, her only narrative arc concerns her body size. Therefore, the show's very narrative structure contains a health narrative that dictates that Mrs. Wolowitz's fatness must be corrected.

Narrative hinges upon introducing a form of imbalance – a wrong that needs to be righted, a challenge that needs to be overcome – and then subsequently attempting to correct that imbalance and bring it back to equilibrium. However, this imbalance can appear in the form of bodily difference as well. David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder focus on this exact issue in their book, *Narrative Prosthesis*. Mitchell and Snyder define narrative prosthesis as “the dependency of literary narratives upon disability” (53). They state that narrative is predicated ideologically on the introduction of some conflict or deviance and the subsequent attempt to resolve that deviance. However, they also claim that when narrative specifically focuses on characters with disabilities, “the effort to narrate disability's myriad deviations is an attempt to bring the body's unruliness under control” (6). As they later state, rarely is the narrative able to return a character to “normal” status, and thus the character with disabilities is either “left behind or punished for its lack of conformity” (55).

While *Narrative Prosthesis* focuses on narrative's reliance on disability in literature, there are also national health narratives that make the same demands on the fat body. In Pat Lyons's article in the *Fat Studies Reader*, she states that the National Institutes of Health labels “over 60% of Americans as ‘overweight or obese’”; this is perceived by NIH as a sign of the “obesity epidemic” sweeping the country (75). Lyon's description of this moral panic certainly seems accurate: according to a CBS article written by Gina Pace, in 2006, the U.S. Surgeon General Richard Carmona said that “obesity is the terror within. Unless we do something about it, the magnitude of the dilemma will dwarf 9-11 or any other terrorist attempt.”

As the public has come to accept the war on obesity, Lyons states that the “diet and weight loss industry has moved from the sidelines to the center of American life” (75). These two industries have remained crucial to shaping attitudes regarding fatness, advertising that the only way to achieve happiness and a healthy lifestyle is by losing weight. This “war on obesity” demands that people labeled as “overweight” and “obese” lose weight so they

can become healthy, even though sustained long-term weight loss has been proven to be ineffective; according to Lyons, the “failure rate for sustained weight loss has remained constant at 90-95%” (75). Nevertheless, millions of Americans continue to believe in the health narrative that dictates weight loss.

This practice of introducing disability into narrative and then attempting to “bring the body’s unruliness under control” is highly prevalent in *The Big Bang Theory*. Raj has a psychological inability to talk to women. However, when he wants to talk to women, he drinks alcohol to return himself to “normalcy.” After a significant breakup with a girlfriend, Raj eventually finds that he has been cured of his psychological problem and can then talk to women without alcohol. While Sheldon never overcomes his OCD-like tendencies, the show is filled with countless instances when his friends attempt to change his behavior. For example, when they eat dinner in their apartment, Sheldon always has to sit in ‘his’ spot on the couch. During one episode, Leonard buys a dining room table and attempts to force Sheldon to alter his routine. But Sheldon refuses to eat at it, and the gang eventually returns to their usual dinner schedule.

However, most importantly to my argument, *The Big Bang Theory* also attempts to correct Mrs. Wolowitz’s body and bring her deviance back to normal. The show states clearly that her weight negatively affects her health; in one episode, Mrs. Wolowitz takes thirty minutes to walk up two flights of stairs (“The Weekend Vortex”). In multiple other episodes, she needs Howard’s help to put on or take off clothing, to take baths, and to rub lotion on herself.

After establishing that Mrs. Wolowitz’s body is deviant and her weight is having “negative” effects on her health, the show then dictates that she must correct the problem through exercise. In one episode, it is revealed that Mrs. Wolowitz once attended a Weight Watchers cruise (“The Higgs Boson Observation”). In another episode, Howard says that she goes to a water aerobics class (“The Spaghetti Catalyst”). And finally, in one episode, Howard gets Mrs. Wolowitz a treadmill because “the doctor says you need to get exercise” even though Mrs. Wolowitz claims that she already gets enough exercise (“The Gorilla Dissolution”). This depicts Mrs. Wolowitz as a person who is out of shape and is experiencing negative consequences from her fatness. Thus, as Mitchell and Snyder suggest, the show attempts to “correct”

Mrs. Wolowitz by demanding that she exercise in order to lose weight. In the end, this mandate takes Mrs. Wolowitz's life. While the show never states the cause of her death, she is the only main character to die on the show and the only character whose cause of death is not old age. The show is essentially sending the message that fatness must be corrected or it will be removed from the show altogether.

THE EFFECTS OF INVISIBILITY

While Mrs. Wolowitz's body from *The Big Bang Theory* might not be at the forefront of viewers' minds, the absence of her body from the show is an intentional decision made by its producer. And, when fatness is alluded to or described, it is relegated to stories, fat suits, or words – the actual fat body is never shown. In this manner, the show is effectually erasing and replacing the fat body with the thin body, stating that fatness is so “repellant” that it *must not* be shown on television.

The decision not to show Mrs. Wolowitz's body is, at its core, a stylistic choice made by the director of the show. In 2012, Mark Dawidziak from *The Plain Dealer* interviewed Carol Ann Susi, who is the voice of Mrs. Wolowitz. According to Susi, when Chuck Lorre, the director of *The Big Bang Theory*, discussed Mrs. Wolowitz's role with her, he said, “Carlton the Doorman. That's the kind of thing we're going for here.” Dawidziak points out that Mrs. Wolowitz actually fits into a larger string of characters that are heard but never seen, saying that Mrs. Wolowitz is a “part of that long TV tradition of equally [invisible] enigmatic characters.” Among those other characters, Dawidziak mentions Carlton the Doorman from “Rhoda,” Orson from “Mork and Mindy,” the PA announcer from “M*A*S*H,” and Robin Masters from “Magnum, P.I.” It is undeniable that Mrs. Wolowitz's absence from the screen is because the director wanted to achieve a certain kind of cinematic effect, a character that is mysterious and enigmatic.

From Dawidziak's interview, however, it is also clear the actress was not concerned about the effect that not showing Mrs. Wolowitz's body would have. When Dawidziak asked her how she responded when Lore told her that Mrs. Wolowitz would be an off-stage character, Susi replied: “It didn't bother me that they'd never show Howard's mother. I absolutely didn't care. A job's a job.” It's clear that Lore and Susi were not concerned about what kind of message it would send if the only fat woman on the show

was relegated beyond the eyes of the viewer while the (thin) characters onstage constantly made jokes about her weight.

An integral concept linked with Mrs. Wolowitz's visibility/invisibility is "hyper(in)visibility." Jeannine Gailey has coined the term "hyper(in) visibility," which is a paradoxical state of visibility/invisibility that occurs in relation to the fat individual. She notes that the fat body is hypervisible because it is "highly public, visually inspected, and made into a spectacle" (7). This materializes in the fact that fatness cannot be hidden; fat people cannot go out in public without having their bodies looked at and visually dissected by strangers. However, she also notes that the fat body is hyperinvisible in that it is "marginalized and erased" to the point where it is dismissed altogether (7). This is demonstrated by the fact that desks and seating on public transportation, for example, are made for the "average-sized" person. Society treats the fat person as if they do not exist, sending the message to fat people that it is *they* who have to fit into *society*, not vice versa. This paradoxical state of hyper(in)visibility – of being simultaneously scrutinized in public and ignored and erased – is a state that fat individuals have to live with.

This state of hyper(in)visibility occurs in *The Big Bang Theory* just as Gailey describes. Mrs. Wolowitz's identity as a fat person is hypervisible because her body type and life are constantly discussed on the show by the characters. An episode hardly goes by without the characters mentioning her weight, her eating habits, her bathroom habits, or her relationship with Howard. Without even seeing her in person, her life is publicly dissected and turned into a spectacle for us to laugh at. On the other hand, Mrs. Wolowitz's hyperinvisibility has been taken to the extreme: her identity as a fat person has been so erased that her body is not even shown to viewers. She is literally as "invisible" as any character can be without disappearing from the show altogether.

The Big Bang Theory does not hide her body entirely, though; instead, it provides us with three brief glimpses of Mrs. Wolowitz. But these moments merely emphasize her absence and the thin body that fills that absence. The first glimpse we get of her is at Howard's wedding in "The Countdown Reflection;" but we get an aerial view of the rooftop where the ceremony is taking place, so all we can identify about Mrs. Wolowitz is that she is larger than the other characters. In the next season, we get a brief glimpse of her as

she is walking past an open door; but again, the moment is brief and all we can make out is a large woman (“The Spoiler Alert Segmentation”). The third and final time we see her body, it is not a real body at all; instead, in “The Cooper Extraction,” we see a fake scenario where Mrs. Wolowitz is dead, and so all we see is a skeleton in a large dress. These brief moments where we catch a glimpse of Mrs. Wolowitz’s body are simply reminders of why the fat body is not visible. This systematic hiding of Mrs. Wolowitz’s fat body and the refusal to show her body just reiterates that it is being hidden because, according to the stigma surrounding fatness, it should not be shown, that the only body that should be shown is the thin body.

The show continues the erasure of the fat body by highlighting the thin body and celebrating the loss of fatness in other characters. In “The Grasshopper Experiment,” Raj is on a date with an Indian woman named Lalita Gupta. Because the two were childhood acquaintances, Raj decides to bring up the subject of her weight loss since he knew her before it happened: “You have lost so much weight! That must have been difficult for you because you were so, so fat! Do you remember?” Lalita confirms that she does remember. Raj, too drunk to understand that Lalita is uncomfortable with this subject, continues by saying, “Of course you do. Who could forget being that fat?” Lalita blushes and says, “Well, I’ve been trying.” Later, when Raj introduces Lalita to all of his friends, he ends with saying, “Isn’t it great, she isn’t fat anymore!” (“The Grasshopper Experiment”). By focusing on the thin body of Lalita and contrasting it with the hidden fat body that she used to possess, this scene clearly hides and erases the fat body and the experiences of fat people. And, since Lalita’s fat body only exists in the past and the show refuses to show it in the present, this scene reinforces the demands that fatness must be eradicated, that it is a state so “deplorable” that it should not only be forgotten, but its loss should be celebrated.

Not only is the fat body erased, but when fat suits are used in the show, the thin characters are even given the control over the display and representation of fatness. In “The Cooper Extraction,” Sheldon visits Texas over the holidays because his sister is having a baby. While he is absent, the rest of the cast throw a Christmas tree decorating party and envision how their lives would be different if they had never met Sheldon. When asked why Leonard and Raj never lived together, Raj narrates what would have happened if they had. In the imagined scene, Raj prepares dinner for

the two of them while Leonard is sitting, wearing a fat suit and reading a newspaper. At this point, Leonard interrupts in the present time and asks why he is fat and Raj is not. In the next instant, we are transported back to the fake scene, but this time Raj is also fat. An instant later, another character from the show also walks in wearing a fat suit, apparently inserting himself into the story and donning an imaginary fat suit because he wanted to be included in someone's story. The use of fat suits in this episode is extremely problematic because it once again emphasizes the thin body while hiding the fat body. The episode suggests that fat bodies can only be shown if they are not *real* fat bodies. And even though fake fat bodies are being shown, the emphasis is always on the *thin* actors who have the power to shed their fat suits and revert to their original (thin) bodies.

Finally, some of the language in the show even erases the fatness and euphemizes the fat identity. In the "Hawking Excitation," Mrs. Wolowitz refers to stuffing her body into a dress as "folding a sleeping bag." In another episode, she refers to her body as spilling out of a girdle "like the Pillsbury Doughboy" ("The Hot Troll Deviation"). And finally, as I have already mentioned, there are several instances where her body is described as being like a car or needing to be lifted by a forklift. Even though it is not entirely pervasive throughout the entire show, the repetitive use of euphemisms, used both by the characters and Mrs. Wolowitz, to describe and replace the fat body serves to further erase the identity of fat individuals. The show's message remains clear: the fat body is so "abhorrent" that not only should it be hidden from view, but the very word "fat" should never even be uttered.

RECLAIMING FAT IDENTITY

So far, the absence of Mrs. Wolowitz's body in *The Big Bang Theory* has only managed to label her body as deviant and reinforce the societal demand that it be corrected and erased. Therefore, I would like to highlight some movements that are rooted in celebrating the fat body and challenging the negative societal attitudes against fat people.

Within the health industry, there is a movement called Health at Every Size, or HAES™, that celebrates the fat body instead of describing it as unhealthy. As Deb Burgard defines the movement in her article in the *Fat Studies Reader*, HAES™ does not define health "by a certain type of weight for all (such as thinness), but rather it defines the correct weight for a person

when they are living a healthy lifestyle” (44). Instead of arguing that health will be achieved when a person reaches a particular weight (thinness), HAES™ is built upon the premise that a healthy lifestyle will lead to a healthy weight for that individual. Two of the core beliefs of HAES™ are that every body type should be celebrated and that weight stigma and prejudice are very harmful to the fat individual (Burgard 50).

There are also two modern examples of attractions that challenge the superiority of thinness. Sharon Mazer writes about Katy Dierlam, who performed as a fat woman at Coney Island’s Sideshow in 1992. Her stage name was “Helen Melon.” In her show, Dierlam/Melon would display her body for viewers and talk with them about her body. But instead of allowing the sideshow to exploit her, she used her performance to challenge the norms that surrounded her body image. During her performance, Dierlam/Melon states openly what her audience is thinking about her body. According to Mazer, she identifies those thoughts as “cultural stereotypes” and thus “reverses the lens of her performance” onto the audience (260). Dierlam/Melon is hoping that her audience will confront their own prejudices about the fat body and, in the end, change them.

Another example of challenging the narrative surrounding fatness is the series of art installations created by Rachel Herrick, titled *The Museum for Obeast Conservation Studies*. In her travelling museum, Herrick displays mannequins that she calls “obeasts;” these mannequins are actually modeled after her own body. By presenting the “obeast” as a wild animal, Herrick is directly stating what many people subconsciously believe: that fatness is degrading and somehow animalistic. As people visit her museums, they see these exaggerated social norms and hopefully reexamine their own notions about fatness.

If the freak show is any indication, the human tendency is to display difference, not celebrate it. The HAES™ movement, Dierlam/Melon, and Herrick have all chosen to counteract the effects of the freak show. They are attempting to foster an environment where difference is celebrated, where fatness is seen as beautiful and normal. They are trying to raise awareness about the consequences of our actions and words on fat people today. Perhaps, if their message was more widespread, Chuck Lorre and Carol Ann Susi would have been troubled by the thought of making Mrs. Wolowitz a hidden fat character and relegating fat identity to the unseen shadows.

Unfortunately, their decision can no longer be reversed. During the eighth season of *The Big Bang Theory*, Carol Ann Susi died, and, with her, the character of Mrs. Wolowitz disappeared forever from the show. Since it is too late to change *The Big Bang Theory*, our only hope lies in this: celebrating fat identity and eradicating the stigma surrounding it so that the next Mrs. Wolowitz can stand proudly on that stage for the entire world to see.

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Beyond Bars: How Print and Visual Media Contributed to the Exploitation of the Dionne Quintuplets and the Gosselin Sextuplets

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In November 1997, a couple named Bobbi and Kenny McCaughey from Carlisle, Iowa gave birth to the first surviving septuplets in recorded history: seven babies born at once. The world was captivated, and a media firestorm ignited during the first months of the children's lives. Then, in the midst of the coverage, *Time* featured an open letter written by three elderly women—surviving members of the same set of quintuplets—to the McCaughey family, pleading with these new parents not to subject their septuplets to the exploitive powers of the media. The following is an excerpt from their letter:

Dear Bobbi and Kenny,

If we emerge momentarily from the privacy we have sought all our adult lives, it is only to send a message to the McCaughey family. . . Multiple births should not be confused with entertainment, nor should they be an opportunity to sell products . . . Our lives have been ruined by the exploitation we suffered at the hands of the government of Ontario, our place of birth. We were displayed as a curiosity three times a day for millions of tourists. To this day we receive letters from all over

Abstract

This paper explores the depiction of the historic Dionne Quintuplets and the modern-day Gosselin Sextuplets in order to demonstrate how the emergence of mass media (e.g., television, photography, and print) made these children's likeness into commodities. The author also focuses on consent and freakification of aspects related to the nuclear family and gender roles.

the world. To all those who have expressed their support in light of the abuse we have endured, we say thank you. And to those who would seek to exploit the growing fame of these children, we say beware.

We sincerely hope a lesson will be learned from examining how our lives were forever altered by our childhood experience. If this letter changes the course of events for these newborns, then perhaps our lives will have served a higher purpose.

Sincerely,

Annette, Cécile and Yvonne Dionne

(“Advice from the Dionne Quintuplets”)

This firm, yet passionate letter was written by the then-surviving Dionne quintuplets (sister Yvonne died in 2001), who became world-famous in the 1930s and '40s for being members of a successful multiple birth consisting of five babies. For nine years, they lived in a zoo-like amusement park known as Quintland, their images and names splashed across print, film, and merchandise. Now, despite approximately seventy years since the Dionnes' release, it is apparent that our society still remains transfixed by the idea of large families, especially multiples.

While advances in technology have brought countless advantages to the modern world, mass media production has also become a new mode of othering humans who challenge our assumptions about the world. It has been approximately nineteen years since the Dionnes sent their letter, and yet other multiples, such as the Gosselin sextuplets of *Jon and Kate Plus 8* and Nadya “Octomom” Suleman’s octuplets, have not escaped the media’s eye. The overwhelming primary purpose of this coverage is to entertain, not inform, an audience. While people were once displayed at crowded carnival sideshows and in museums, the more distanced portrayal of human difference in print and film (including television and newsreels) triggers much more distant and less empathetic connections with these subjects, forcing contemporary “human oddities” to become commodities. Media-coined terms such as “Octomom” reflect how much these children are romanticized but ultimately dehumanized.

What attracts audiences to families with multiples? This reason is closely tied to the freak show: an exaggeration of or juxtaposition with

the ordinary. Just as the display of giants or little people found at circuses exaggerates size or shows featuring bearded women challenge what it means to be feminine, the Dionne quintuplets and Gosselin sextuplets ask us to reconsider our perception of the nuclear family, defined as a self-sufficient unit comprised of both a maternal and paternal caregiver and their progeny. No other families of multiples have had their personas so widely distributed in the media as these two families. At the height of their popularity, these children—despite the wide generation gap—were so easily exploited because their depiction in both print and visual forms made them into commodities that simultaneously challenged and reaffirmed the values of the nuclear family.

This paper will analyze four depictions of the two families' "everyday" lives: two textual (one from *The New York Times* and another from *People Magazine*) and two filmed (scenes from the 1938 movie *Five of a Kind* and episodes from Seasons Three and Four of *Jon and Kate Plus 8*). I will draw upon media theory, psychology, and rhetorical theory in order to analyze and demonstrate how the media continues to encourage the ideals of the Western nuclear family by using the likenesses of vulnerable children. However, before one analyzes these media representations, it is crucial that one first understand the real stories of the children whose likenesses were used to sell an extreme and often idealized depiction of family life.

THE FAMILIES

The Dionne Quintuplets—Yvonne, Annette, Cécile, Émilie, and Marie—were taken from their impoverished biological parents mere months after their 1934 birth and remained separated from them for the first decade of their lives. Their parents were deemed unfit after they were caught putting the children on display in a Chicago-based exhibit to earn enough money to care for them. The children became wards of the Canadian government and were housed in a specialized hospital. Unfortunately, their new home became less like a hospital and more like an amusement park, and it was eventually dubbed "Quintland." For the next nine years, the government encouraged an eager audience to pay admission at the gates in order to catch a glimpse of these child oddities playing behind one-way glass. The girls were, for the most part, unaware that they were being watched and were only allowed outside at certain times of the

day (Royal 442). Despite its initial attempts to avoid exploiting the young girls for profit by “saving” them from their parents, Canada had ironically put the children on display according to their own terms. The Canadian government abused its powers in order to profit from children who could give no consent when they were infants.

The Gosselins were born seventy years later in 2004. It was Jon and Kate Gosselin’s second pregnancy after years of infertility treatments. As with the McCaughey family, there was a media storm after their birth, and, several months later, a television special from the Discovery Channel was released. After another successful special appeared on TLC, that network debuted *Jon and Kate Plus 8* in 2007. The show featured all ten Gosselins: Jon, Kate, the twins (Cara and Maddy) and the sextuplets (Alexis, Hannah, Aaden, Collin, Leah, and Joel). The show was a commercial success and spawned a book series written by Kate Gosselin as well as tabloid media coverage. After it was revealed that husband Jon Gosselin was involved in an extramarital scandal, the parents divorced. Even after an executive decision to continue the series with the twist that Kate would now live as a single mom, the reality show was canceled in 2011 (Royal 2-3). Their show may have been founded on the idea of an unconventional family when it first aired, but it collapsed when the father figure was out of the picture.

Jon and Kate Plus 8 had a five-season run from 2007 to 2011, and the Dionnes’ history seemed to repeat itself. Jon and Kate Gosselin consented to their children’s appearance in a reality TV show and permitted their children’s faces to appear in magazines and promotional material for the program. The sextuplets were never physically trapped behind glass or steel bars; the evidence of their exploitation is more subtle due to the affordances and constraints associated with print and visual media. In the end, through editing and other persuasive techniques, the directors and writers were handed control of the children’s representation.

FREAK SHOWS, MASS MEDIA, AND COMMODIFICATION

Humans have been put on display in forms of freak shows and human zoos for centuries. Yet what is important to note about the Dionnes is that they were born at a time when technology was making monumental strides, particularly in visual mediums such as film. Although it may seem unlikely to place news coverage, film, tabloids, and reality television shows in the

same category as freak shows, there are many connections between these examples of humans being exploited for capital gain. How that subject is perceived by an audience can be manipulated by whatever media is used to distribute their image. Much like a carnival barker's stories about individual exhibits, the tale becomes a romanticized version of the truth that draws a crowd. When film was introduced in the early twentieth century, the freak show was brought to an audience who was not limited to the physical fair ground, where a traveling human exhibit would normally be displayed. In fact, some of the first films depicted freak shows and other human exhibits on screen (Thomson 56).

Once this technology became more commonplace, the freak show had been transferred to a new medium that continued to encourage the idea that anyone who is not a normate is a source of intrigue and, therefore, entertainment. According to scholar Guy Debord's "Mass Media and Commodity Fetishism," "all that was once directly lived has become mere representation" (5). Any representation then becomes an object to be bought and sold by distributors. Once this happens, the audience's empathy subsides, unlike if they were to see an exhibit in person at a traveling freak show. Disability scholar Rosemarie Garland Thomson attributes this concept to what she deems to be an "ocularcentric era." She writes that "the rapid flourishing of photography after 1839 provided a new way to stare at disability, [and in] our ocularcentric era, images mediate our desires and the ways we imagine ourselves" (57). The image permits staring more easily and, therefore, enables mass consumption of representations of human subjects like the Dionne or the Gosselin families.

The contrast between Quintland and the films in which the Dionnes were depicted echoes the evolution of the physical, staged freak show to the big screen. Audiences were able to travel to Quintland to observe the girls playing in their nursery behind glass as if the children were in a zoo. Yet, when they were filmed, their activities eating and playing in the nursery were captured by the camera as it was rolling, edited at a later time, and placed in cinemas across the world. As with their feature film *Five of a Kind*—which I will soon discuss and analyze—sometimes the scripted scenes were intercut between scenes in which the children sang, danced, and (often) reinforced traditional gender roles by playing house with their dolls. While these are typical activities in which many children participate, it is

important to remember that the editors made conscious decisions about which shots from the hours and days of footage would be used to construct their version of typical childhood. The mass distribution of the Dionnes' images led to movie ticket sales.

Unlike feature films that have scripts, reality TV enables its subjects to—at least to some degree—interact with the camera by addressing the audience. They can, as *Jon and Kate Plus 8* did, reflect on a previous event captured on camera and discuss their feelings about that incident. However, just how real are reality shows? If the genre's purpose is to show what daily life is like for its subjects who are interacting in an environment they are accustomed to, how could this be harmful for child subjects? The reality television genre is no less exploitive than any other type of visual media. As scholar Lucia Palmer explains, “reality television is fabricated and packaged as much as any scripted program; its truthfulness is an artifice created to sell its products . . . [I]t is designed for a specific audience with a specific goal motivated by commercial factors” (124).

Palmer gives examples of some of the ways in which reality television is harmful for teenage and child viewers, including the dangers of mainstream heteronormativity and adult perceptions of beauty (128-9). However, Palmer also cites a major problem with the way such shows challenge, but ultimately sustain, the cultural perception that large, nuclear families are ideal for Western life (125). For viewers of the Gosselins' show, *Jon and Kate Plus 8*, it may seem at first that reality television provides a means to show the world not simply how hectic life can be with sextuplets but also how many aspects of their life are average. Yet, as I will discuss in the next section of this paper, the situations being captured in the early seasons are manipulated by editors to show a slice of life that is entertaining and appeals to the general public's views on the nuclear family. Thus, although the draw for an audience is their one unusual trait (having eight children), to keep an audience invested, the show is built around traditional family values.

REPRESENTATIONS OF THE DIONNES AND GOSSELINS: AN ANALYSIS

In this section, I examine the ways print and visual communication mediums—including film, television episodes, tabloids, and newspapers—have been used to sell the Dionnes and Gosselins to the public. Although

these four different types are all able to capture the multiples' "everyday lives," text and film/modern television convey messages differently and, therefore, display these children in different ways.

Print Mediums

As some rhetoricians and media specialists, such as Neil Postman, assert, print forms of representation in the age of television and film are no more virtuous than others; they simply allow for different types of misuse. According to Postman's renowned 1985 work, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, textual modes of communication before the age of television were "serious, inclined toward rational argument and presentation, and, therefore, made up of meaningful content" (52). In other words, print before the twentieth century allowed a media consumer to think more critically about what they read. Now the most popular print forms mimic television and film's tendency to entertain rather than inform. While Postman never speaks on human exhibits in his work, his piece, "The Typographic Mind," explains why the tabloids that cover the Dionnes and Gosselins read more like vivid scripts about domestic life than journalism.

Both the print articles recount special occasions in these children's lives, and both occur within a setting similar to a nuclear family's home. Both pieces feature vivid language and primarily happy details meant to entertain rather than inform. However, the children's own words are absent, leaving the writers or their guardians to speak for them. The first article is one from *The New York Times*, entitled "Dionne Girls Rouse Nursery 3 Hours Early to Investigate Pere Noel's Bounty," which is about the quintuplets waking up to a Christmas morning. The second article is a publicity article from *People*, detailing the sextuplets' circus-themed birthday party. Both articles begin the same way: with a lighthearted opening, as in this example from the Gosselin article: "Raising eight children can be a circus – a comparison Kate Gosselin took to heart to celebrate her sextuplets' birthday" (Corrison) and this one from the Dionnes': "The Dionne Quintuplets awoke at 4:30 A.M. today and aroused the nursery to find out what Pere Noel had left for them. Thus began an exciting day of hijinks" ("Quintuplets Slide All Over the Place"). What is important to realize here is that the writers' word choices themselves do not particularly exploit the children; rather, it is the way the articles are clearly meant to be light

entertainment. It disguises the fact that these children have little say regarding whether or not they want to be featured in the articles. Their guardians (The Canadian government and Jon and Kate Gosselin) allow the writers to speak for them. In fact, in *People*, only Kate Gosselin speaks: “All nine of us came together – dreamed together, planned together, set up together and enjoyed a huge milestone with tons of our friends” (Corrison). Their individual voices are lost in this collective “us.”

Visual Mediums

Print mediums may leave a consumer with a picture of the everyday lives of the Gosselin and Dionne multiples in their minds, but visual mediums like television and film are more harmful due to the notion that “seeing is believing.” In other words, television is highly selective, controlled by editors and directors to produce the most entertaining viewing experience for the audience as possible. In doing so, an audience may not consider what is occurring off-screen. The children are surrounded by concepts that both reinforce and challenge some of the major constructs of a nuclear family: compliance with traditional gender roles and male/female parental figures. However, I will provide context for these media depictions so that we may better analyze them.

Both visual mediums starring these families of multiples feature parental figures—but these parental figures do not comply with the traditional mold of a mother or father. We begin with the Dionne sisters’ film, *Five of a Kind* (1938), a comedy starring the Dionne quintuplets as the fictitious “Wyatt” quintuplets—yet the characters still bear the real girls’ names: Yvonne, Annette, Cécile, Émilie, and Marie. The girls were only four-and-a-half at the time of the film’s release. The little girls portrayed as characters in the film are kept in a Canadian institution guarded by “kindly” white-uniformed nurses and their “kindly,” fatherly caretaker named Dr. John Lock (who is based on Quintland’s real-life Dr. Defoe). The plot centers around the competition between two radio journalists (portrayed by Cesar Romero and Claire Trevor) to be the first to put the quints’ voices on the radio. Intercut between the plot points, the film features long scenes depicting the tiny girls playing with dolls behind glass in a room similar to the one at Quintland, meeting puppies, and singing songs in matching dresses and bows (*Five of a Kind* 15:00, 17:00, and 41:49). Upon its release,

culture critic Frank S. Nugent of *The New York Times* condemned the film, proclaiming that the girls have “become victims of mass production” and deeming the Twentieth Century Fox film as a “factory-made product with a superimposed plot” (qtd. in “Five of a Kind”). However, in the same article, Nugent ironically laments that this film is not as entertaining as the two previous films in which the Dionnes starred.

In the season three premiere of *Jon and Kate Plus 8* entitled “A Day in the Life,” the episode’s goal is to show the audience what a normal day in the Gosselin house typically looks like. The entire twenty-one minutes takes place at the Gosselin residence in the fall of 2008 and details what it is like getting the twins out the door to school as well as the antics of the sextuplets’ naptime and playtimes. Much like the Dionne film’s reels and the scenes from *Five of a Kind*, the toddler-aged children are filmed as they play outside, eat snacks, and occasionally smack each other. The Gosselins fit the mold of the nuclear family better than the Dionnes, who were taken from their biological parents as infants, because the Gosselins do have a mother and father present. However, the show is still compliant with the major appeal of human exhibits: it is a nuclear family but taken to the extreme. Jon, the father, still leaves for work while Kate, the frazzled mother, stays home to send the older kids off to school and then take care of six toddlers. In both instances, the Dionnes’ and Gosselins’ situation is simultaneously familiar—yet unfamiliar, which is where the intrigue and “entertainment” value comes into play.

While it is true that the depiction of the Gosselins does not seem to try to be perfect, both representations feature scenes where the female children adopt the roles often associated with their gender: taking care of other children or their toys. Here, the filmmakers and television producers have—much like freakshow owners—chosen to include these scenes without much preamble.

In *Jon and Kate Plus 8*’s episode “Day in a Life,” one of the seven-year-old twins is shown keeping the younger children under control, ordering them around the house to play games upstairs just as her mother, Kate, does earlier in the episode (17:00). There is a similar and—rather haunting—scene in the Depression-era film *Five of a Kind*; in an extended scene, each of the little girls in their matching outfits simultaneously washes her own identical baby doll, then feeds it a plastic toy bottle, scolds it in French, and tucks it

into bed. All lined up, an image of an assembly line comes to mind: little girls behind glass learning to obey cultural norms with their imaginary children. These two scenes may seem innocent to an unassuming audience, but it nonetheless remains a conscious choice by the producers to include these particular scenes in order to emphasize the need for traditional roles in nontraditional families.

These examples are quite subtle. One particular instance, however, occurs during the first and second episodes of Season 4, in which the Gosselin family has a “boys’ day out” and a “girls’ day out.” Jon takes the four-year-old boys to a golf course and a fitness center, while Kate takes the five girls shopping at the grocery store and then to paint pottery (“Boys Day Out,” “Girls Day Out”). In this two-part episode, one of the boys even tries to get in the van with the girls and is carried away kicking and screaming by his father (“Girls Day Out” 10:00). This further highlights the underlying assumption that, even though Jon and Kate are raising so many children, they will still be raised to comply with dominant gender norms.

One question remains, however: Given how popular the quintz were at the time, why did the filmmakers feel compelled to make a fictionalized film? As popular culture historian Paul Talbot suggests, *Quintland* could only sustain the public’s attention for so long. As he explains, “When one looked at them for a minute or two, he had seen all there was to see” (Talbot 81). Film, meanwhile, has the ability to manipulate its subjects to make them more interesting. It can place the girls in situations that they would not ordinarily encounter in the nursery. For instance, one scene shows the doctor presenting the five children with puppies. Then the camera rolls and captures the children’s expressions and, in some cases, screams of terror. Here, the scene’s entertainment value stems from the audience watching the girls to see how they will react and what cute things they will do, such as hugging a puppy or—as several of them do—running away in fear. Except for the scenes in which the Dionnes sing and dance, they do not have lines. In this way, it is strikingly similar to modern-day reality shows’ way of placing participants in a situation and letting the cameras roll. Then, before releasing this footage to the public, the editors manipulate and rearrange what is captured on film and shrink down the course of a day into an hour or half-an-hour. However, what is particularly significant about this film is that not only does the movie fictionalize the little girls’ lives, but it

simultaneously appeals to and challenges early twentieth-century assumptions about domestic life.

JUSTICE FOR EXPLOITED MULTIPLES

Of course, despite all the injustice these children have faced, not everyone in the public is entranced by the romanticization of multiples. There have, in fact, been questions and controversy regarding whether or not the Gosselin parents have violated child labor laws. However, according to one study conducted by *The Akron Law Review*, the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) does not protect children depicted on reality shows because “though the FLSA governs child labor, it expressly exempts from coverage of children employed as ‘actor or performer’” [sic] (Royal 456). Not only does this allow Kate’s children to be filmed using her parental consent, but the children do not qualify for protection from the law if any of them should sue their guardians, as the Dionnes did in 1998, approximately one year after the McCaughey septuplets were born.

Fortunately, Cécile, Annette, and Yvonne, the last living Dionne sisters, asked that they be compensated for their years in captivity and that they be given what share of the profits they were owed from the Canadian trust fund promised to them after they became wards of the state. In the end, they were given a settlement equivalent to 2.8 million dollars (DePalma). The women, along with their deceased sisters who never received justice when they were alive, were granted an apology and escaped the public life as best they could, but the Gosselins continue to periodically appear in TLC specials and tabloid-publicity magazines.

Unlike the early nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the general public now condemns the display of human subjects at carnivals or museums. However, this certainly does not mean that the livelihoods of vulnerable populations like children are not distributed for entertainment. They are watched as they grow up into future spouses and parents, completing the cycle of the nuclear family. We are still drawn to individuals who exaggerate, and therefore challenge, our culture’s perceived notions of normal. It is crucial to study all reincarnated forms of the freak show—everything from reality television and film to newspaper and magazine articles—because, in an age when entertainment dominates most forms of communication, it is more difficult to connect “past consequences” with the future (Rich 371). The

merchandising of the Gosselins' images after the Dionnes' self-proclaimed hellish childhood in the public eye proves this, as laws allow their guardians to continue to speak for the sextuplets.

Still, there is a silver lining. Annette, Cécile, and Yvonne Dionne were granted their wish back in 1997: the McCaughey septuplets were never subjected to the degree of in-person attention or mass media distribution which the Dionnes had once endured. Now, at nearly nineteen years old, they have escaped a life filled with publicity photographs and merchandising—aside from an occasional interview marking a birthday or milestone. The question remains as to how the Gosselins (and any other famous multiples in the future) will fair in a world that still considers them oddities.

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Author Biographies

Laken Brooks is a current literature student at Emory & Henry College. She anticipates a future in Renaissance studies, pondering the intersections of cultural discourse and minority experiences. Particular interests for Brooks include, but are not limited to deviant women, Shakespeare, the performance of gender, and the ethical reclaiming of diverse voices into our Western literary canon. She hopes to travel to further research the authentic experiences of individuals not traditionally included in our Classics and to enter a field of education of publishing.

Jessica Carducci is a senior in the English studies program. With a background in digital design, she worked on both the Design and Publicity teams of the *DLR* while also a Prose Editor for *The Broken Plate*. This was her first year in both the *DLR* and *The Broken Plate*, and her focus has been on science fiction in the publishing world and popular culture. She is currently working to establish her own press focusing on marginalized voices in speculative fiction, Tiny Ghost Publishing.

Lauren Cross is a Ball State junior pursuing a major in English studies and a minor in creative writing. She plans to graduate in May 2017, and then she hopes to attend law school and concentrate in social justice. When she is not spending time with friends and family, she writes pieces for her blog and dreams of moving near a coast.

Nikole Darnell is a junior with a major in creative writing and a minor in Japanese. She is also an Honors student and is a second year *Digital Literature Review* member of the editorial team. This year, she focuses on tying in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* in with the classic American freak show. Next year as a senior, she will be a member of *The Broken Plate* and *Jacket Copy Creative*.

Olivia Germann is a senior English literature major with minors in creative writing and marketing. She also directs and runs her own shadow cast, in addition to being an executive board member for the Busted Space Theatre Company at Ball State. She is about to study with renowned poet Alicia Stallings for her acclaimed “Poetry and the Muses” workshop in Athens, Greece. After she graduates from Ball State she plans on pursuing an MFA in poetry.

Cassandra (Cassie) Grosh is a sophomore triple majoring in English literature, classical culture, and classical Latin with a minor in women's and gender studies. Cassie's focus this year has been on the *Harry Potter* series and the treatment of magical creatures. While in the *DLR*, she has been working on her editing skills to improve and help others when she continues with the journal next year. She intends to finish her degree at Ball State and continue onto graduate school where she will further her studies in English literature.

Kathryn Hampshire is a junior English literature major with minors in leadership studies and professional writing. She enjoys assisting her peers with writing-related concerns and is employed by Ball State as a tutor at the Writing Center and as a writing assistant for the Department of Accounting. This second year on the *DLR* staff, Hampshire has served as the lead editor, and she will be continuing with the *DLR* next year as a teaching assistant. She plans to pursue her graduate education abroad after completing her undergrad degree at Ball State.

Allison Haste is a senior at English studies major with a minor in professional writing. She is a member of the editorial team for the *Digital Literature Review*. She is also a member of Kappa Delta Sorority and the Frathernal Values Society.

Sarah Keck is a senior majoring in English with a concentration in creative writing with a minor in marketing. She enjoys reading Christian and dystopian fiction and writing nonfictional stories and volunteers as a copy editor for Ball State's newspaper, *The Daily News*, and a copy editor for her fellowship's newsletter in Fishers, IN. This year with the *DLR*, she worked with the editorial team to gain more experience while focusing on how people with disabilities are othered when normates (people who don't have disabilities) try to not notice their disabilities. She is pursuing a career in editing and publishing and will be graduating with a Bachelor's degree.

Bryce Longenberger is a senior at Ball State Univeristy with a major in English studies He is an Honors Student and has been on the editorial team of the Digital Literature Review for the past two years. He has presented at Taylor's Univeristy Making Literature Conference in 2015 and at Butler University's Undergraduate Research Conference in 2016.

Amory Orchard is a senior English major with a concentration in rhetoric and writing and a minor in creative writing. Her scholarly interests include writing pedagogy, pop culture studies, and creative nonfiction. In addition for being a co-editor and Email Guru for the *DLR* Editorial Team, she

has worked for multiple on-campus organizations, including the Writing Center, VBC for Creative Inquiry, and University Libraries. Earlier this year, she presented original research at the NCPTW writing center conference in Salt Lake City, Utah and plans to eventually publish.. She looks forward to pursuing an MA in creative writing and eventually landing a career that will allow her to continue write, research, and help others write. Her work has appeared on the BSU English Blog and the literary journal *Thoreau's Rooster*.

Lauren Seitz is a senior English rhetoric and French double major with minors in communication studies and linguistics. Her scholarly interests include critical media and pop culture studies and intersectional feminist theory. In addition to being a part of the *DLR's* editorial team, she also works as a writing tutor and spends most of her free time with the Ball State Speech Team. After graduation, she will start her new job as an English Teaching Assistant at the Université de Lorraine in Nancy, France.

Isabel Vazquez is a senior English studies major and a Spanish minor. She has been on the Digital Literature Review for two as part of the editorial and design team. Her scholarly interests include postcolonial literature, immigrant theory, and the preservation of indigenous culture. After graduation, she plans to travel to Mexico in order to explore her heritage as part of a self-identity project.

Shannon Walter is a senior rhetoric and writing major with minors in literature and digital publishing. She helped to create the look of the journal as a member of the design team, and as the spring term design team leader. While finishing the last year of her undergraduate degree, she plans to begin her graduate studies with the Emerging Media and Design Development program at Ball State. She is pursuing a career in the publishing community.