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Mobilising the Monster: Modern Disabled Performers' Manipulation of the Freakshow

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The past two decades have seen the publication of at least half a dozen books that consider the part fairs, circuses, sideshows and freakshows play in the continuing cultural labour to define, categorise and control the human body, including Robert Bogdan's *Freakshow*, Rosemarie Garland Thompson's *Extraordinary Bodies*, and her edited collection *Freakery*, and Rachel Adams' *Sideshow USA*. These writers cast the freakshow as a theatre of culture, worthy of critical attention precisely because of the ways in which it has provided a popular forum for staging, solidifying and transforming ideas about the body and bodily difference, and because of its prominence in the project of modernity (Thompson "From Wonder to Error" 2-13). They point to the theatrical mechanisms by which the freakshow maps cultural anxieties about corporeal difference across 'suitable' bodies. For, as Bogdan (3) says, being a freak is far more than a fact of biology. The freak personae that populate the Western cultural imaginary—the fat lady, the bearded lady, the hermaphrodite and the geek—can only be produced by a performative isolation, manipulation and exaggeration of the peculiar characteristics of particular human bodies. These peculiarities have to be made explicit, in Rebecca Schneider's (1) terms; the horror-inducing tropes of the savage, the bestial and the monstrous have to be cast across supposedly suitable and compliant flesh. The scopic mechanisms of the freakshow as a theatre, as a cabinet of corporeal curiosities in which spectators are excited, amazed and edified by the spectacle of the extraordinary body, thus support the specific forms of seeing and looking by which freak bodies are produced.

It would, however, be a mistake to suggest that the titillating threat of this face-to-face encounter with the Levinasian other fully destabilises the space between signifier and signified, between the specific body and the symbolic framework in which it sits. In a somewhat paradoxical cultural manoeuvre, the ableist, sexist and racist symbolic frameworks of the freakshow unfold according to what Deleuze and Guattari (178) would call a logic of sameness. The roles, relationships and representational mechanisms of the freakshow—including the 'talkers' that frame the spectator's engagement with the extraordinary body of the freak—in fact function to delineate "degrees of deviance" (178) or difference from an illusory bodily norm. So configured, the monstrous corporeality of the freak is also monstrously familiar, and is made more so by the freak spectacle's frequent emphasis on the ways in which non-normative bodies accommodate basic functions such as grooming and eating. In such incarnations, the scenography and iconography of the freakshow in fact draws spectators into performative (mis)recognitions that manage the difference of other bodies by positioning them along a continuum that confirms the stability of the symbolic order, and the centrality of the able, white, male self in this symbolic order. Singular, specific, extraordinary bodies are subject to what might, in a Levinasian paradigm, be called the violence of categorisation and comprehension ("Is Ontology Fundamental?" 9). The circumstances of the encounter reduce the radical, unreadable difference of the other, transporting them "into the horizon of knowledge" ("Transcendence and Height" 12), and transforming them into something that serves the dominant cultural logic. In this sense, Petra Kupperts suggests, "the psychic effects of the freak spectacle have destabilizing effects, assaulting the boundaries of firm knowledge about self, but only to strengthen them again in cathartic effect" (45). By casting traits they abhor across the freak body (Thompson

Extraordinary Bodies 55-56), spectators become complicit in this abhorrence; comforted, cajoled and strangely pleased by a sense of distance from what they desire not to be. The subversive potential of the prodigious body evaporates (Thompson "From Wonder to Error" 3; *Extraordinary Bodies* 78). An evaporation more fully effected, writers on the freakshow explain, as the discursive construct of the freak was drawn into the sphere of medical spectacle in the late nineteenth century. As the symbolic framework for understanding disabled bodies 'advances' from the freak, the monster and the mutant to the medical specimen (Thompson "From Wonder to Error" 13; *Extraordinary Bodies* 70, 78-80; Synder and Mitchell 370-373; Stephens 492), the cultural trajectory away from extraordinary bodies with the capacity to expand the classes and categories of the human is complete. The medical profession finally fulfils the cultural compulsion to abstract peculiar bodily characteristics into symptoms, and, as Foucault says in *The Birth of the Clinic*, these symptoms become surveillable, and controllable, within an objective schema of human biology. Physical differences and idiosyncrasies are "enclosed within the singularity of the patient, in that region of 'subjective symptoms' that—for the doctor—defines not only the mode of knowledge, but the world of objects to be known" (x). The freak body becomes no more than an example of human misfortune, to be examined, categorised and cared for by medical experts behind closed doors, and the freakshow fades from the stage of popular culture (Thompson *Extraordinary Bodies* 70).

There can, of course, be no denying the need to protect people with disabilities from exploitation at the service of a cultural fetish that enacts a compulsion to define and control bodily difference. However, the tenor of recent debate in disability, cultural and performance studies has been characterised by a desire to reconsider the freakshow as a site for contesting some of the cultural logics it enacts. Theorists like Synder and Mitchell argue that medical discourse "disarms the [disabled] body of its volatile potency" (378), in the process denying people with disabilities a potentially interesting site to contest the cultural logics by which their bodies are defined. The debate begins with Bogdan's discussion of the ways in which well-meaning disability activists may, in their desire to protect people with disabilities from exploitative practices and producers, have overlooked the fact that freakshows provided people with disabilities a degree of independence and freedom otherwise impossible (280-81). After all, as disabled performer Mat Fraser says in his documentary *Born Freak*,

The Victorian marvels found fame and some fortune, and this actually raised the visibility, even the acceptability, of disabled people in general during a time when you could be attacked on the streets just for looking different. These disabled performers found independence and commanded respect.

... If I had been born a hundred years ago, given the alternatives of—what? living the life of a village monster or idiot or being poked or prodded for cataloguing by medical types—there's no doubt about it, I would have wanted to be in show business. (*Born Freak*)

This question of agency extends to discussion of whether disabled performers like Fraser can, by consciously appropriating the figures, symbols and scenography of the freakshow, start to deconstruct the mechanisms by which this contested sphere of cultural practice has historically defined them, confronting spectators with their own complicity in the construction of the freak.

In her analysis of Coney Island's Sideshows by the Seashore, Elizabeth Stephens reflects on this contemporary sideshow's capacity to reclaim the political currency of the freak. For Stephens,

sideshow are sites in which norms about the body, its limits and capabilities, are theatricalized and transformed into spectacle, but, in which, for this very reason, they can also be contested. Non-normative bodies are not simply exhibited or put on display on the sideshow stage, but are rather performed as the unstable—indeed, destabilising—product of the dynamic interrelationship between performer, audience and theatrical space. (486)

Theorists like Stephens (487) point to disabled performers who manipulate the scopic and discursive mechanisms of the sideshow, street performance and circus, setting them against more or less personal accounts of the way their bodies have historically been seen, to disrupt the modes of subjection the freak spectacle makes possible and precipitate a crisis in prescribed categories of meaning. Stephens (485-498) writes of Mat Fraser, who reperformed the historical personal of the short-armed Seal the Sealboy, and Jennifer Miller, who reperformed the persona of Zenobia the bearded lady, at Sideshows by the Seashore. Sharon Mazer (257-276) writes of Katy Dierlam, who donned a Dolly Dimples babydoll dress to reperform the clichéd fat lady figure Helon Melon, again at Sideshows by the Seashore, counterposing Melon's monstrous obesity with comments affirming her body's potent humanity, and quotes from feminist scholars and artists such as Suzy Orbach, Karen Finley and Annie Sprinkle. Sharon Synder and David Mitchell (383) write of Mary Duffy, who reperforms the armless figure of the Venus de Milo. These practices constitute performative interventions into the cultural sphere, aligned with a broader set of contemporary performance practices which contest the symbolic frameworks by which racial and gender characteristics are displayed on the popular stage in similar ways. Their confrontational performance strategies recall, for instance, the work of American performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña, who reappropriates colonial and pop cultural figurations of the racialised body in works like *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit...*, in which he and Coco Fusco cast themselves as two caged savages. In such works, Gómez-Peña and his collaborators use parallel performance strategies to engage the "spectacle of the Other-as-freak" (297). "The idea is to exaggerate the features of fear and desire in the Anglo imagination and 'spectacularize' our 'extreme identities', so to speak, with the clear understanding that these identities have been invented by the surgery of the global media" (297) Gómez-Peña says.

These remobilisations of the monstrous operate within the paradigm of the explicit, a term Schneider coined a decade ago to describe the performance art practices of women who write the animalised, sexualised characteristics with which they are symbolically aligned across their own corporeally 'suitable' bodies, replaying their culturally assigned identities "with a valuable, 'in your face' vengeance" (100), "a *literal* vengeance" (109). Such practices reclaim the destabilising potential of the freak spectacle, collapsing, complicating or exploding the space between signifier and signified to show that the freak is a discursive construct (22-23), and thus for Schneider, following Benjamin, threatening the whole symbolic system with collapse (2, 6). By positioning their bodies as a ground that manifestly fails to ground the reality they represent, these performers play with the idea that the reality of the freak is really just part of the order of representation. There is nothing behind it, nothing beyond it, nothing up the magician's sleeve—identity is but a sideshow hall of mirrors in which the 'blow off' is always a big disappointment. Whilst bodies marked by disability are not commodified, or even clearly visible, in the Western capitalist scopic economy in the same way as Schneider's women performers, disabled performers still use related strategies to reclaim a space for what Schneider calls a postmodern politics of transgression (4), exposing "the sedimented layers of signification themselves" (21), rather than establishing "an originary, true or redemptive body" (21) beneath.

The contestational logic of these modes of practice notwithstanding, Stephens (486) notes that performers still typically cite a certain ambivalence about their potential. There are, after all, specific risks for people with disabilities working in this paradigm that are not fully drawn out in the broader debate about critical reappropriation of racist and sexist imagery in performance art. Mobilisations of the freak persona are complicated by the performer's own corporeal 'suitability' to that persona, by the familiar theatrical mechanisms of recognition and reception (which can remain undertheorised in meta-level considerations of the political currency of the freakshow in disability and cultural—rather than performance—studies), and by a dominant cultural discourse that insists on configuring disability as an individual problem detached from the broader sphere of identity politics (Sandahl 598-99). In other words, the territory that still needs to be addressed in this emergent field of practice is the ethics of reception, and the risk of spectatorial (mis)recognitions that reduce the political potency of the freak spectacle.

The main risk, of course, is that mobilisations of the freak persona may still be read by spectators as part of the phenomenon they are trying to challenge, the critical counterpositions failing to register, or failing to fully disrupt the familiar scopic and discursive framework. More problematically, the counterpositions themselves may be reduced by spectators to a rhetorical device that distances them from the corporeal reality of the encounter with the other, enabling them to interpret or explain the experience of disability as a personal experience by which an individual comes to accommodate their problems. Whilst the human desire to construct narrative and psychological contexts for traumatic experience cannot be denied, Carrie Sandahl (583) notes that there is a risk that the encounter with the disabled body will be interpreted as part of the broader phenomenon Synder and Mitchell describe in *Narrative Prosthesis*, in which disability is little more than a metaphor for the problems people have to get past in life. In this interpretative paradigm, disability enters a discursive and theoretical terrain that fails to fully engage the lived experience of the other. Perhaps most problematically, mobilisations of the freak persona may be read as one more manifestation of the distinctively postmodern desire to break free from the constraints of culturally condoned identity categories. This desire finds expression in the increasingly prevalent cultural phenomenon of voluntary enfreakment, in which people voluntarily differentiate, or queer their own experience of self. As Fraser says when he finds out that a company of able-bodied freaks is competing with him for audiences at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, "[t]he irony is, these days, everyone is trying to get in on our act" (*Born Freak*). In a brave new world where everybody wants to be a freak, activist artists "must be watchful", Gómez-Peña warns, "for we can easily get lost in the funhouse of virtual mirrors, epistemological inversions, and distorted perceptions" (288). The reclamation of disability as a positive metaphor for a more dispersed set of human differences in the spectacle of daily life (287-98), and in theoretical figurations of feminist philosophy that favour the grotesque, the monstrous and the mechanical (Haraway *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*; Braidotti *Nomadic Subjects*), raises questions for Thompson ("Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory" 9) and Sandahl (581-83). If "disability serves as a master trope for difference," Sandahl says, then anybody can adopt it "...to serve as a metaphor expressing their own outsider status, alienation and alterity, not necessarily the social, economic and political concerns of actual disabled people" (583). The work of disabled performers can disappear into a wider sphere of self-differentiated identities, which threatens to withdraw 'disability' as a politically useful category around which a distinctive group of people can generate an activist politics. To negotiate these risks, disabled performers need to work somewhere between a specific, minoritarian politics and a universal, majoritarian politics, as Sedgwick describes in *Epistemology of the Closet* (91; cf. Thompson "Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory" 5; cf. Stephens 493). Performers need to make their experience of otherness explicit, so that their corporeal specificity is not abstracted into a

symbolic system that serves the dominant cultural logic. Performers need to contextualise this experience in social terms, so that it is not isolated from the sphere of identity politics. But performers cannot always afford to allow the freak persona to become one more manifestation of the myriad idiosyncratic identities that circulate in the postmodern popular imaginary. It is by negotiating these risks that performers encourage spectator's to experience—if only fleetingly, and provisionally—a relationship to the other that is characterised not by generalisation, domestication and containment (Levinas "Substitution" 80, 88), but by respect for the other's radical alterity, by vulnerability, and, in Derrida's reformation of Levinasian ethics, by a singular, reciprocal and undecidable responsibility towards the other (Derrida 60-70). This is what Levinas would call an ethical relationship, in which the other exists, but as an excess, a class of being that can be recognised but never seized by comprehension ("Is Ontology Fundamental?" 7, "Transcendence and Height" 17), or sublimated as a category of (or complement to) the same (13, "Meaning and Sense" 51).

Mat Fraser's mobilisation of Sealo the Sealboy is one of the most engaging examples of the way disabled performers negotiate the complexities of this terrain. On his website, Fraser says he has always been aware of the power of confrontational presentations of his own body, and has found live forms that blur the boundaries between freakshow, sideshow and conventional theatre the best forums for "the more brutal and confrontational aspect of my investigation into disability's difficult interface with mainstream cultural concerns" (*MatFraser.co.uk*). Fraser's appropriation of Sealo was born of a fascination with the historical figure of Stanley Berent. "Stanley Berent was an American freakshow entertainer from the 1940s who looked like me," Fraser says. "He had phocomelia. That's the medical term for my condition. It literally means seal-like limbs. Berent's stage name was Sealo the Sealboy" (*Born Freak*). Fraser first restaged Sealo after a challenge from Dick Zigun, founder of the modern Sideshows by the Seashore. He restaged Berent's act, focused on Berent's ability to do basic things like shaving and sawing wood with his deformed hands, for the sideshow's audiences. While Fraser had fun playing the character on stage, he says he felt a particular discomfort playing the character on the bally platform used to pull punters into the sideshow from the street outside. "There is no powerful dynamic there," Fraser laments. "It's just 'come look at the freak'" (*Born Freak*). Accordingly, after a season at Sideshows by the Seashore, Fraser readapted the experience as a stage play, *Sealboy: Freak*, in which Sealo is counterposed with the character Tam, "a modern disabled actor struggling to be seen as more than a freak" (*Born Freak*). This shift in the theatrical mechanisms by which he stages the freak gives Fraser the power to draw contemporary, politically correct spectators at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival into the position of sideshow gawkers, confronting them with their own fascination with his body. A potent example is a post-audition scene, in which Tam says

I read this book once that said that the mainstream will only see a disabled performer in the same way they view a performing seal. Very clever, but just mimicry. No. No it can't be like that anymore. We've all moved on. People are no longer more fascinated by how I do things, rather than what I say. I am an actor, not a fucking freak. (*Born Freak*)

But, as Tam says this, he rolls a joint, and spectators are indeed wrapped up in how he does it, hardly attending to what he says.

What is interesting about Fraser's engagement with Sealo in *Sealboy: Freak* is the way he works with a complicated—even contradictory—range of presentational strategies. Fraser's performance becomes explicit, expository and estranging by turns. At times, he collapses his own identity into that of the freak, the figure so stark, so recognisable, so much more harshly drawn than its real-life referent, that it becomes a simulacrum (cf. Baudrillard 253-

282), exceeding and escaping the complications of the human corporeality beneath it. Fraser allows spectators to inhabit the horror, and the humour, his disabled identity has historically provoked, reengaging the reactions they hide in everyday life. And, perhaps, if they are an educated audience at the Fringe, applauding themselves for their own ability to comprehend the freak, and the crudity of sideshow display. However, self-congratulatory comprehension of the freak persona is interrupted by the discomfiting encounter with Tam, suspending—if only provisionally—spectators’ ability to reconcile this reaction with their credentials as a politically correct audience.

What a closer look at mobilisations of the freak in performances such as Fraser’s shows is that manipulating the theatrical mechanisms of the stage, and their potential to rapidly restructure engagement with the extraordinary body, enables performers to negotiate the risk of (mis)recognition embedded in the face-to-face encounter between self and spectator. So configured, the stage can become a site for contesting the cultural logic by which the disabled body has historically been defined. It can challenge spectators to experience—if fleetingly—the uncertainties of the face-to-face encounter with the extraordinary body, acknowledging this body’s specificity, without immediately being able to abstract, domesticate or abdicate responsibility for it—or abdicate responsibility for their own reaction to it. Whilst spectators’ willingness to further reflect on their complicity in the construction of the other remains an open and individual question, these theatrical manipulations can at least increase the chance that the cathartic effect of the encounter with the so-called freak will be disrupted or deferred.

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