

# FREAKERY

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CULTURAL SPECTACLES  
OF THE  
EXTRAORDINARY BODY

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An American Tail: Freaks, Gender, and the  
Incorporation of History in Katherine  
Dunn's *Geek Love*

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One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.  
—SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR, *The Second Sex*, 1952<sup>1</sup>

Organisms are not born, but they are made.  
—DONNA HARAWAY, "The Promises of Monsters," 1992<sup>2</sup>

A true freak cannot be made. A true freak must be born.  
—KATHERINE DUNN, *Geek Love*, 1989<sup>3</sup>



These epigraphs reflect an ongoing preoccupation within feminist theory with how best to explain women's difference. Simone de Beauvoir's once-revolutionary statement acknowledges that gender is not inherently connected to biology, but rather is assumed through the repetition of a complex and arbitrary system of practices. Expanding Beauvoir's claim, Donna Haraway asserts not only that gender is a discourse mapped onto the body, but that our experience of the body itself materializes only through the various social interactions that define its boundaries. In each critic's constructivist understanding, femininity emerges as an oppressive discourse that must be understood and rescripted.

In contrast, Olympia Binewski, the narrator and protagonist of Katherine Dunn's 1989 novel *Geek Love*, emphasizes essential bodily difference as a determining factor in her social identity: one does not become a freak, but rather is born one. Within the context of the novel, which chronicles the downfall of a family of carnival freaks deliberately created by Lillian and Al Binewski through exposure to radiation and the massive ingestion of drugs, Olympia's essentialism is "false"; the "masterpiece" of her differently shaped body is not natural but the product of her parents' careful and intentional experimentation. However, within the context of the scene, in which the unfortunate dwarf is lifted onstage at a strip club as the men in the audience laugh and jeer, her insistence on the value of authentic bodily difference is a legitimate defense against humiliation. Although Olympia's assertion seems to counteract the constructivist ideology of the novel, this inconsistency ultimately indicates that claims about

identity are always context-specific. As Diana Fuss has argued, the charge of essentialism so frequently leveled against theories of identity needs to be tempered by an understanding of the context and consequences of that essentialism: "The question we should be asking is not 'is this text essentialist (and therefore "bad")?' but rather, 'if this text is essentialist, *what motivates its deployment?*'"<sup>4</sup> Countering poststructuralism's blanket critique of identity politics, Fuss advocates a consideration of "the political investments of the subject's complex positioning in a particular social field."<sup>5</sup> At various moments *Geek Love* invokes both essentialist and constructivist models of identity, creating a tension that, on the one hand, demonstrates that prejudices against bodily difference are culturally produced, and on the other, recognizes the materiality of the body as it experiences pain or becomes the subject of violence or ridicule. I read the novel's vacillation between essentialist and constructivist understandings of the body not as a logistical inconsistency, but as paradigmatic of how Americans attempt to manage the problem of bodily difference that has persistently troubled the nation's social and legal structure.

This problem is generated by the inability of constitutional law—which guarantees the abstract equality of all citizens—to protect the rights of those who *look different*. Political and social theorists have repeatedly demonstrated the failure of the American legal system to recognize difference in cases involving affirmative action, fetal rights, and sexual harassment where the blindness of the law to race and gender obstructs the rights of the injured party.<sup>6</sup> In such cases concepts crucial to American national identity, such as individual merit, blind justice, and abstract standards, ignore the historical conditions that have shaped the identities of marginalized people or, as Patricia Williams puts it in her discussion of affirmative action, "a refusal to talk about the past disguises a refusal to talk about the present."<sup>7</sup> Williams posits historical understanding as a remedy to institutional blindness by addressing the past experiences of inequality that have shaped the current interests, abilities, and beliefs of marginalized groups. *Geek Love* is a text that explores the necessity of situating the problem of difference and equality within history. Focusing relentlessly on the physical body as a site of oppression, the novel illustrates what Michel Foucault has called the "microphysics of power," which situate domination deep in the ritualized practices of everyday life,<sup>8</sup> but it also posits the body firmly anchored within history as a site for the reclamation of agency.

The relationship between history and the body becomes increasingly fraught as technology develops unprecedented capabilities for altering the physical form that call into question the limits of knowledge and the boundaries of the human body. *Geek Love* critiques institutions that endorse bodily transformation as a means of escaping from history and suggests instead that this new plasticity of the body must be informed by a knowledge of one's personal past and its position within local and national history. In *Geek Love*, however, history, like bodies, is malleable, and its significance shifts depending on the context of its retelling. Faced with potentially limitless possibilities, the novel manifests an anxiety—shared by many critics of postmodernism—about boundaries and limitations. Without recourse to the natural, who is to say when science should stop trying to change the body's shape and genetic makeup? And without master narratives that signal the Truth, how can we maintain a sense of the significance of past events?

In *Geek Love*, the freak show becomes the locus for this anxiety about the malleability of bodies and history. The freak's partial identity, her inability to fit into fixed categories of definition, is what designates her as a human oddity worthy of display for profit. In the past,

individuals born with bodily differences, such as Siamese twins, dwarfs and midgets, or the human torso, would premise their sideshow exhibits on displays of their normality, which demonstrated their ability to accomplish everyday tasks with ease, to think intelligently, and to engage in respectable relationships with others.<sup>9</sup> Exhibits focused on the performer's healthy relationship with a spouse, ability to bear children, and acceptance into polite society as part of her freakishness. For example, the human torso Prince Randian was celebrated for his ability to roll a cigarette and light it with his mouth, and the marriage of the Siamese twins Chang and Eng to two normal sisters was widely publicized as proof of their remarkable condition. In contrast, those performers who were not born true freaks, such as the snake charmer, the savage, the strongman, or the tattooed person, emphasized their *difference* from the average person. In either case, the exhibit was premised on the deviance of the freak's body; its titillating transgression of boundaries—savage/human, child/adult, man/woman, self/other—called into question the audience's preconceived notions of the possibilities and limitations of the human body.

In unsettling the stable boundaries of the human body, the freak show also throws into crisis fixed ideas about genealogy and history. The "true life" pamphlets that frequently accompanied exhibits provided a biographical description of the subject, his or her physical oddities, "official" endorsements of authenticity by doctors and scientists, and, in more exotic cases, descriptions of the geography and native people of the freak's country of origin, which were often grossly exaggerated or patently untrue. According to Robert Bogdan, "Some pamphlets were forty and more pages long, going on in elaborate, fraudulent detail about the trek through the jungle that resulted in finding the lost tribe of which the exhibit was a member—when in fact the person was born and raised in New Jersey."<sup>10</sup> The very identity of the freak is thus premised on the invention of a history that will draw maximum crowds and profit. If some biographies embellished the freak's identity by inventing exotic, faraway origins, others displayed an anxiety about genealogy, insisting on the normality of the freak's parents and offspring. Such pamphlets emphasized the freak's ability to produce normal, healthy offspring, as if to insure the audience of the isolated deviance of the freak's body against an anxiety about the generation of a race of similarly freakish progeny. Both those biographies that claimed affiliation with exotic tribes and those that described their subjects as isolated anomalies reflect an anxiety about the freak's place in history and work to situate her outside of, or as a bizarre and impotent anomaly in, mainstream American life.

Although the freak show has all but vanished from American culture, the questions it raises about the significance and definition of the human body have multiplied as science develops unprecedented capabilities for understanding, penetrating, and restructuring the inner and outer spaces of the body. As *Geek Love* so brilliantly demonstrates, both the freak show and new surgical technologies converge in their obsession with sexuality, production, and reproduction. The novel critiques those institutions that focus on the body with the ostensible goal of bettering human life, but ultimately offer only fetishized models of beauty and perfection that endorse bodily transformation as a means of escaping from history. Medical technology, which promises improved health and longevity, becomes instead a means of normalizing the body, of producing replicants of a single, idealized model. The ability to replicate bodies and body parts—now possible through cosmetic surgery, with more sophisticated processes such as cloning projected in the near future—combined with new reproductive technologies that allow sex without reproduction, in vitro fertilization, fertility treatments,

and surrogate pregnancy focus the crisis of definition most prominently on the female body.<sup>11</sup>

In *Geek Love* the tension between production and reproduction, procreation and replication, is most tellingly illustrated in the conflict over whether Olympia's estranged daughter Miranda will choose to keep her tail or have it surgically removed. The conflict over Miranda's tail is the central structuring device of the narrative (the tale), the occasion for repeated movement between accounts of the present and memories of or documented information about the past. A vestigial remnant that recalls the human body's articulation with the natural and animal worlds, as well as Miranda's connection to her own bizarre familial past, the tail thematizes the necessity of thinking about bodily difference within the context of personal and collective history.

#### AN AMERICAN TAIL

Early in the novel, Miranda must choose whether to keep her tail, which she displays for profit by dancing naked at the Glass House, or to take the large sum of money the wealthy heiress Mary Lick offers her to have it removed. By leaving Miranda the story of her past, Olympia provides a third choice: to keep her tail but to understand it as the product of a family history rather than simply as a fetishized object of male desire. This choice is paradigmatic of the novel's insistence on the historical nature of embodied identity. Knowing your own history becomes a means of negotiating between institutions that attempt to impose an official version of identity and those that seek to erase the past altogether. For Michel de Certeau, the retelling of officially sanctioned histories in "ordinary language" allows for the insertion of "the insignificant detail" that "makes the commonplace produce other effects."<sup>12</sup> The retelling of stories, which enables the ordinary person to make meaning out of official narratives, may become an empowering tactic for asserting agency and staking a claim in the workings of large and often impersonal cultural institutions. In the face of institutions that seek to classify them as disabled, monstrous, or perverse, the freaks in *Geek Love* recount their past as a means of affirming their unique form of embodiment and situating their family history within the context of American national identity.

The novel's intervention in American historiography focuses on the freak show, a form of entertainment distinctly associated with the low, the spectacular, and the mass culture audience, as it traces the freaks' experiences and subjectivities as they move through the small towns, highways, shopping malls, and supermarkets that make up the American landscape. Significantly, the Binewski children's origins are connected to a date of national victory; they derive ceaseless delight from the story of how their parents met on a Fourth of July weekend when Lillian Hinchcliff, "a water-cool aristocrat from the fastidious side of Boston's Beacon Hill," gets the handsome Aloysius Binewski out of a pinch by agreeing to geek for him, an outrageous and profane juxtaposition of blue-blooded Americana with the low and spectacular that is characteristic of the novel. Aloysius, the Binewski patriarch, "was a standard-issue Yankee, set on self-determination and independence." A self-made man who brings the carnival success through the Franklinesque virtues of thrift and ingenuity, Aloysius conceives of the ingenuous plan of breeding his own freak show because, as Lillian often remarks, "What greater gift could you offer your children than an inherent ability to earn a living just by being themselves?" (7). Recognizing the significant relationship between the body and the

ability to generate income, the Binewskis are excellent interpreters of the capitalist system that constructs the body as a commodity.

The Binewskis solidify their children's sense of identity through the retelling of family history, which cements their connection to one another through a shared extraordinary past reflected in their extraordinary bodies. But in spite of their affirmation of familial bonds and indisputable American patriotism, the Binewskis are unable to maintain their sense of place within a larger national context that would provide them with a historical understanding of the freakish body. Significantly, even the youthful Lil is unable to connect her own local experience to historical events; she clearly remembers July 3rd as the date when she saved Al, yet she muses, "it was during a war, darlings . . . I forget which one precisely" (4). This forgetting of national events presages Lil's eventual drug-induced oblivion, which causes her to believe she is completely alone in the house where she lives with both her daughter and granddaughter. Unable to accept her "failures," the freakish offspring who died in utero or soon after birth, Lil keeps them stored in jars of formaldehyde that she visits each day. Refusing to mourn their deaths, she engages in the melancholic practice of obsessively polishing their jars. The end of *Geek Love*, which reveals the novel as an extended act of mourning through the retelling of history, will provide an alternative to Lil's willed ignorance of the past.<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, Arty, the eldest Binewski son, has a strong sense of interpersonal relationships but little understanding of context. As Norval Sanderson, a journalist who keeps records of the carnival's proceedings, writes: "National and international politics are outside [Arty's] experience and reading. Municipal power relationships, however, are familiar tools to him. He has no real grasp of history—seems to have picked up drifts from his reading—but he is a gifted analyst of personality and motivation" (190). Devoid of any conception of the larger operations of power or history, Arty is a skilled manipulator of the local and specific, a quality that brings him temporary success but eventually causes his downfall, a question to which I return in my discussion of the Arturan cult.

Of course, this disregard for national politics and history may have to do with the minimal role that marginalized people have been accorded in the making of such structures. As feminists and scholars of color have long pointed out, the creation of history has always been the prerogative of the privileged white male, while women and other marginalized groups are persistently associated with the low, the bodily, and the everyday. In its recuperation of the other in American culture, the novel focuses incessantly on bodily difference in explicit and magnificent detail to demonstrate that an alternative American history would necessarily examine the way that official narratives work to occlude the subjection of deviant bodies. *Geek Love* delineates the way that freaks are able to manipulate their excess embodiment for the purposes of profit and personal empowerment. While outside the carnival gates bodily difference is confronted with stares of pity and disgust, the freaks create a space where they voluntarily display their bodies as spectacles for the viewing pleasure of "norms," who they condescendingly describe as "assembly-line items" (282), "engulfed by a terror of their own ordinariness" (223). This pride comes from the kind of essentialism expressed in Olympia's statement: "A true freak cannot be made. A true freak must be born." However, with Arty's rise to power the freaks become unable to situate their claims to authenticity within history and instead focus on turning their unique bodies into commodities. This kind of bodily

authenticity, which involves replication rather than reproduction, increasingly serves the ends of men while proving harmful and disempowering to the female freak.

“IT’S THE ERA OF FREAKINESS!”: THE CULT OF THE BODY

While a history of marginalized people would need to focus on the body in pain and as the subject of violence, disembodiment has typically been a privilege accorded to those who are wealthy and powerful enough literally to “forget” their fleshly origins. Lauren Berlant argues that within a liberal democracy, disembodiment is the prerogative of certain privileged citizens: “The white, male body is the relay to legitimation, but even more than that, the power to suppress that body, to cover its tracks and traces, is the sign of real authority, according to Constitutional fashion.” Those who do not embody this normative ideal because of race or gender experience a “surplus corporeality” where the “body is not abstract, but hyper-embodied, an obstacle and not a vehicle to public pleasure and power.”<sup>14</sup> This ideal of disembodiment materializes in the cult that evolves around Arty, born with flippers instead of arms and legs, who capitalizes on the success of his sideshow act by inducing his followers to give up all of their money and work for the privilege of gradually having their arms and legs amputated in his image. Historically, religious cults in America have encouraged extreme bodily deprivation in order to break down the will and reach spiritual insight. The Arturan cult, however, like the contemporary “cult of the body,” has new technologies at hand that go beyond simple deprivation in their ability to penetrate and reconfigure both the interior and exterior of the body itself. Ironically, while the cult claims to offer the privilege of *disembodiment* through literal means—the amputation of limbs—it actually approximates numerous contemporary cultural institutions that *fetishize the body*, such as cosmetic surgery, bodybuilding, and the diet industry. The partnership of the skilled surgeon Doc Phyllis and the psychic Fortunato—who can enter the patient’s brain to eliminate pain and trauma—which enables the bodily mutilations of the Arturans, taps into an anxiety about the ability of advanced medical technologies to alter the contours of the body in unprecedented ways. These invasive technologies combine with the language of self-help, which provides instruction on how to “become happy with your inner self,” to create a contradictory discourse about the body that asserts, on the one hand, the capacity for change and perfection, and on the other, its insignificance to personal satisfaction.

Not surprisingly, Arty’s first acolyte is Alma Witherspoon, an obese, working-class woman whom he addresses directly during one of his shows: “Can you be happy with the movies and the ads and the clothes in the stores and the doctors and the eyes as you walk down the street all telling you there is something *wrong* with you?” His question recognizes that idealized images of femininity make women feel constant dissatisfaction with their appearance as it is perceived by others. Using the rhetoric of pop psychology, Arty consoles Alma by asserting that these are culturally produced ideals that wrongly conflate virtue and intelligence with physical beauty. He assures her that what she really wants “to know is that you’re *all right!* That’s what can give you peace!” (178). But in this case, the signifier for being “all right” is remaking oneself in Arty’s image: promising a refuge from a world filled with “terrorist attacks, mass murders, disease, divorce, crooked politicians, pollution, war and rumors of war” (231), the cult offers its members a personal means of escape rather than considering the source of their disillusionment in collective or historical structures, hence its motto, “Peace,

Isolation, Purity" (227). While Arty seduces Alma Witherspoon by promising her freedom from a culture where judgments of personal value are made on the basis of physical appearance, he introduces her into a strikingly similar world, where virtue is determined by how closely the initiate approximates yet another bodily ideal. Adopting the rhetoric of advertising, Arty boasts that his cult is a desirable "choice" available to those who can afford the admission fee, but the pretense of free will conceals a constrained situation that offers only the choice of escape, not a means of coping with or changing the world itself.

This form of escapism, which focuses on the body at the expense of more collective, historically informed strategies for change, approximates contemporary "health" industries such as bodybuilding for competition, which offer individual satisfaction through bodily change and endorse an ideology that combines self-help and physical enhancement. Bodybuilding for competition is distinguished from most other forms of strength-enhancing fitness in that, while it gives the individual an appearance of well-being and massive strength, it is in fact dangerously unhealthy and can be fatal. Like the Arturan cult, bodybuilders reject dominant beauty ideals, deliberately making the body a spectacle by taking the culturally valued attributes of strength, fatlessness, tan, and muscle to grotesque excess. Significantly, competitive bodybuilding self-consciously appropriates the discourse of the sideshow: as a recent letter to *Muscular Development* enthused, "It's the era of freakiness! (. . . and there's nothing wrong with freakiness . . . it's the name of the game!)"<sup>15</sup> Likewise, Sam Fussell writes: "It's the Greatest Show on Earth. The bodybuilder comes complete with everything but a velvet restraining rope and castors. To this day, 'freaky' is the highest compliment one bodybuilder can pay another."<sup>16</sup>

*Geek Love* draws a striking parallel between the fictional cult with its genesis in the sideshow and contemporary institutions such as bodybuilding that are obsessed with defying biology and history to alter the human form beyond the possibilities provided by "nature." Both the bodybuilder and the Arturan believe in the infinite malleability of the human physique. Emphasizing excess, the language of bodybuilding boasts of the ability to create a body larger and more muscular than could occur in the natural world. Bodybuilders and Arturans share a nonessentialist view of the boundaries of the body in which drugs and surgery are necessary products in its recreation.<sup>17</sup> Unlike feminist understandings of an inessential body, which envision an increased acceptance of difference, these cults of the body work toward an idealized final referent. If they signal a radical redefinition of bodily appearance, it is not toward a new acceptance of physical difference and variety, but rather toward replicating a single fetishized ideal. The freakishness of bodybuilders challenges dominant beauty ideals but does not undermine the existence of an idealized shape and size. Likewise, the Arturans can have their limbs removed in an *approximation* of their leader, but Arty remains the true freak, authentic because he was born with bodily difference rather than having to work for it. Because he "has no real grasp of history," Arty seeks to remove bodies from their sociopolitical contexts and fashion new identities for them. However, this solution works only temporarily for a woman like Alma Witherspoon, whose immobile torso is soon "retired" to be replaced by a series of identical acolytes. Like the movies, ads, and medical practitioners he criticizes, Arty's authentic freakishness calls for replication of an idealized model rather than new ways to think about difference.



PRODUCTION, REPRODUCTION, AND THE FEMALE FREAK

Arty's ability to turn his peculiarly formed body into an ideal demonstrates his talent as a manipulator of the local and specific. But if the cult works through the creation of replicants in the image of one, idealized form, then the female body, with its ability to create originals through reproduction, poses a threat to Arty's absolute power.<sup>18</sup> Although the "truth" of the freak may be determined through biological birth, the novel imagines radical forms of sex, conception, and pregnancy that shift received notions of what it means to be a woman and the boundaries of the human body itself. Lil and Al's breeding experiments, the twins' desire for an abortion, and Olympia's artificial insemination all suggest an inessential understanding of the female body and its capacity and desire for reproduction. Because the ability to reproduce freaks, creating difference rather than similarity, calls Arty's regime into crisis, he must maintain complete dominion over the sexual and reproductive activities of each of his sisters.

The Siamese twins, Electra and Iphegenia, threaten Arty because they are able to draw such large audiences, and as they mature, they begin to capitalize on their appeal both onstage and off. Realizing the erotic suggestion of their joined bodies, which play directly into male fantasies of multiple orifices and partners, Elly states matter-of-factly: "You know what the norms really want to ask . . . How do we fuck? That and who, or maybe what. Most guys wonder what it would be like to fuck us. So, I figure, why not capitalize on that curiosity?" (207).<sup>19</sup> While initially Iphy has doubts about relinquishing her virginity—the twins' disagreement suggesting the mixed messages that women receive about sex—after their first experience they willingly offer themselves to those who are able to pay their exorbitant prices, making a profit off of their already objectified condition. Their story suggests that if women both inside and outside the carnival gates are treated as sexualized objects, subjected daily to desiring male gazes they cannot avoid, then there is little difference between the twins' performing onstage and off, and their prostitution offers them a means of controlling the uses to which their bodies will be put. As Anne McClintock has argued, depending on the circumstances, prostitution can be an empowering choice for women who otherwise would have little control over their bodies, sexuality, or working conditions.<sup>20</sup>

Precisely because the twins' prostitution guarantees them a degree of autonomy, the enraged Arty unceremoniously "gives" them to the Bag Man "just to fuck" (245). By "giving" his sisters away, Arty reaffirms their status as objects of exchange. After forcefully preventing them from aborting the resulting pregnancy, he has Elly, the more dominant and aggressive twin, lobotomized, leaving Iphy to care for both the fetus and the limp torso of her sister. Norval Sanderson describes "the pale Iphy in her painful progress down the row toward the Chute with her swollen belly pulling her forward while she struggles to balance the flabby monster that sprouts from her waist" (272–73). Her pathetic attempts to support the senseless torso of her sister call attention to the parasitic nature of unwanted pregnancy: like the passive and drooling Elly, the fetus is another alien "monster" dependent upon the body of the mother. In contrast with the "choice" offered by the Arturan cult, in this sequence the novel makes its most explicit endorsement for the protection of women's right to make decisions about sex, pregnancy, and reproduction. Rather than simply affirming the necessity of "choice"—which disturbingly participates in the logic of the Arturans—*Geek Love* shifts the grounds of the abortion debate to reveal the larger questions obscured by the rhetoric of pro-life/pro-choice. Elly's lobotomy and unwanted pregnancy vividly illustrate the ways in which

legal intervention in questions of reproduction, motherhood, and fetal rights can deny the subjectivity and bodily integrity of pregnant women.<sup>21</sup> The final conflict between the twins represents the only possible outcome for the persistent denial of bodily integrity: the body that turns on itself as the two subjectivities violently enact their divided loyalties.

Because of their beauty and exotic body the twins experience in extreme form many of the same obstacles as "norm" women. Olympia's extreme ugliness, however, excludes her from the patriarchal system of exchange at work within the novel. As Luce Irigaray has described it in "Women on the Market," women living under patriarchal capitalism become like commodities, objects of exchange by and for men. As such, women have no inherent value; their worth is determined solely through their appeal to men: "in order for a product—a woman?—to have value, two men, at least, have to invest (in) her."<sup>22</sup> If this is the case with the twins, who so accurately mirror male fantasies and spend their lives moving from one site of domination to another, then what becomes of the woman who is so ugly that she is desired by no one?

Olympia's extreme ugliness renders her, in effect, a worthless commodity. She is the only woman in the novel who remains unattached to any partner, a position that grants her an agency unavailable to other women, but also causes her profound isolation and loneliness. As Alma Witherspoon would attest, a culture obsessed with images of beauty leaves little room for the empowerment of ugly women. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick makes a similar argument about the fat woman in a clothing store who has the economic means to make a purchase but receives a message that "your money is not negotiable in this place." Although she has money to spend, she experiences the "precipitation of [her] very body as a kind of cul-de-sac, blockage or clot in the circulation of economic value."<sup>23</sup> Similar to the fat woman, the dwarf is an obstacle in the exchange of commodities and bodies, and Olympia, like Alma, seeks refuge in disembodiment. Yet unlike the Arturans, who seek disembodiment through the amputation of limbs, Olympia assumes a prosthetic identity as a radio personality fittingly called "the Story Lady," which allows her a form of escape from a body that on the street, is met either by pitying stares or averted glances that seek to render her invisible.

Her one positive bodily experience is pregnancy, which she achieves without physical penetration or other intimate human contact. Asking Chick to use his telekinetic powers to move Arty's sperm, "the little wiggly things," into her body, Olympia undergoes a fantastic form of artificial insemination that parallels recent scientific advances that allow for impregnation without intercourse. Like a sperm bank donor, Arty never knows he is the father of the child, and his crass economic pragmatism forces Olympia to give Miranda up when they discover that her only asset is a curly, pink tail, an unmarketable spectacle.

In the case of both the twins and Olympia, pregnancy and reproduction—which signal the ability to generate life, to produce more freaks—threaten Arty's coercive system of replication. If the cult establishes his absolute autonomy through the subjection of others, female freaks hold the possibility of making other freaks that might challenge his authority. As I have argued, the making of freaks is, of course, also the making of history. While Arty attempts to obstruct Olympia's attempts to start a new family, after the carnival comes to a fiery end she works to reestablish a connection to her daughter and to leave her with the story of her own past, a knowledge that can inform the decisions that Miranda makes about her body. Olympia's plea that she keep her tail is less a resort to authentic bodily integrity than a recognition that familiarity with her past might complicate or change what otherwise appear to be endless and inconsequential options.

POSTMODERN PLASTICITY AND THE TECHNO-FREAK

The freaks in *Geek Love*, who simultaneously proclaim their own authenticity and use various technologies to manipulate the body, provide an interesting limit case for questions that arise in an age when science and theory are engaged in a radical redefinition of what it means to be human.<sup>24</sup> Cybernetics, the information superhighway, artificial organs, gene splicing, and other newly developing technologies raise the stakes for ontological and epistemological debates that were once purely speculative. Feminists have focused on the effects these developing technologies, at once promising and extremely dangerous, might have on the female body: fantasies of the infinite malleability of the human form, reproduction without sex, and consumption without labor are potentially liberating or dangerous, depending on their context and consequences. *Geek Love* imagines one nightmare scenario in which the combination of technology and feminism becomes profoundly destructive.

Inspired by the practices of the Arturan cult, Mary Lick takes what Susan Bordo has called "postmodern plasticity" to horrifying extremes by offering disembodiment as a solution to a life where beauty and sexuality are distractions from more important callings. For Bordo, the problem with "postmodern plasticity"—the sense of limitless freedom to alter and correct the contours of the body—is that it embraces normalizing standards of beauty premised on a willful ignorance of the historical inequalities that have been connected to various forms of bodily difference. She writes: "Gradually and surely, a technology that was first aimed at the replacement of malfunctioning parts has generated an industry and an ideology fueled by fantasies of rearranging, transforming, and correcting, an ideology of limitless improvement and change, defying the historicity, the mortality, and indeed, the very materiality of the body."<sup>25</sup> Although "the ideology of limitless improvement" is primarily geared toward the replication of a slender, white, beauty ideal, Mary Lick uses medical science to subvert these normalizing impulses. If patriarchal culture objectifies women by judging their value on the basis of physical appearance, Mary's brand of feminism sees the eradication of the "femaleness" of the female body—by removing breasts and hair, sewing shut the vagina, clitorrectomy, and other types of mutilation—as the only solution to gender inequalities. Olympia's discovery that Mary has offered her daughter a large sum of money to have her tail removed, thus beginning a gradual process of disfigurement, necessitates her violent intervention to preserve both tale and tail.

Mary's scopic addiction to "changing people" involves sponsoring surgical mutilations of the female body so that she can watch them taking place and capture them on film for later. A horrifying antidote to the beauty myth, "Mary Lick's purpose is to liberate women who are liable to be exploited by male hungers. These exploitable women are, in Miss Lick's view, the pretty ones. She feels great pity for them" (162). Using her vast wealth, Mary pays promising young women to have their bodies altered so that they are no longer beautiful, thus "liberating" them to pursue advanced professional careers. Imposing her own asexuality onto other women, she dreams of manufacturing a race of professional superwomen who would live alone, caring only for themselves and the furthering of their high-powered careers. In her version of feminism, the body is always a dangerous detraction from more important concerns. By using technology to mar its beauty, she fantasizes that she is liberating women from the distractions of physicality in order to achieve more important goals.

Yet her interventions are not limited to eradicating beauty and the attributes of femininity. Significantly, her first operation is on Carina, "Half black. Half Italian. Poor as shit. A dropout but she tested high in aptitudes" (159). After using acid to mar her beauty, Mary funds Carina's college education and helps her to get a job as a translator. Carina's operation literally burns the skin from her face, erasing the physical markings of her racial identity, while her "education" removes her from her "shit poor" class affiliation. Although it may be problematic to associate race with physical characteristics, the destruction of those features seems a particularly violent and perverse solution to racial inequality, for if Carina's ethnic hybridity and extreme poverty are inscribed upon her body, their erasure signals the intentional obliteration of her history in the service of what one wealthy, white woman perceives as a more rewarding existence. The danger of Mary Lick is not her rejection of an essential, unchanging bodily identity, but rather her need to remake the bodies of underprivileged women in the image of her own desires.

The fatal confrontation between Olympia and Mary Lick occurs in the locker room of a health club, the site of Americans' compensatory search for the perfect body in the face of disillusionment with other, more collective forms of embodiment, such as religious, political, and national identity. Caught in the deadly cloud of sterilizing chemicals Olympia has prepared for her, Mary Lick dies and takes the dwarf along with her. At the end of the novel, a newspaper clipping describing the two women's deaths and a letter from Olympia reveal that the narrative is her way of posthumously bequeathing the Binewski family history to its final descendant. Unlike Lil's melancholic attachment to her dead babies, Olympia's letter accomplishes the work of mourning by working through the trauma of her family's violent death and the loss of her only love, her brother Arty.

Miranda, who has always had an aesthetic attraction to individuals with various bodily deformities as the objects of her medical illustrations, now possesses the history of her own difference. If the men who leer at her and "want to pump her full of baby juice" (18) when she dances nude onstage invest her tail with one set of meanings, her family history provides an alternative. By leaving Miranda's future unresolved, the novel does not attempt to reconcile or evaluate these meanings. This refusal to make evaluative judgments or offer a way out of its relentless horrors may be one reason some reviewers felt dissatisfied with *Geek Love*, dismissing it as pure spectacle overcome by its own perversions. Mary Lick remarks soon before her death, "It's amazing that you and I are so much alike, isn't it?" and Olympia agrees: "She's right. We each appear totally alone in our lives. . . . We choose to seem barren, loveless orphans. We each have a secret family. Miss Lick has her darlings and I have mine. All we've really lacked is someone to tell" (340).

The act of telling is a way for Olympia to memorialize her own death and to commemorate the lives of a family that would not be recognized by mainstream history. In her letter, she bestows a sense of collective identity that Miranda did not previously have: "I can't be sure what the trunk will mean to you, or the news that you aren't alone, that you are one of us" (348). This sentence echoes the climactic "wedding feast" of Tod Browning's 1932 film *Freaks*, in which the tall, beautiful Cleopatra is threatened by a throng of angry freaks who chant that she is "one of us." And indeed, by the end of the film the opportunistic Cleopatra is punished for marrying Hans the midget for his money: inexplicably, through the freaks' violent collective intervention, she becomes "one of us," a squawking, half-woman encased

behind bars at the freak show. Like *Geek Love*, the spectacle of her grotesque body, which is suggested at the film's opening but not revealed until the end, becomes the occasion for storytelling that will invest her difference with meaning. As an audience stares open-mouthed at Cleopatra's cage, the barker launches into the film's narrative, which reveals the origins of her misshapen form as a just punishment for her avarice and cruelty. As Mary Russo has argued, the image of Cleopatra's body "remarginalizes the sideshow freaks as commercial oddities who, perhaps, should not be blamed for their inhuman behavior."<sup>26</sup>

Do the film and the novel leave the freak's body—and, significantly, in both cases it is a female freak—invested with purely negative meanings? In *Freaks*, becoming "one of us" is a punishment, while *Geek Love*, although more ambiguous, nonetheless connects Miranda to a history of violence and pain. Both texts move to normalize the freak's shocking body, as the film's epilogue finds Hans and Frieda enjoying a placid bourgeois retirement, and Olympia makes herself invisible by adopting a prosthetic identity. However, her death implies that American culture has not yet made room for an acceptance of physical difference, and the novel's power lies precisely in its refusal to suggest a utopian community that would relieve its readers of an overwhelming sensation of oppression and constraint: if "norms" view freaks as the stuff of nightmares, *Geek Love* seems intent on producing precisely that effect.<sup>27</sup> Both novel and film insist upon the necessity of the past in defining who we are and how we will live in the present. And although Olympia resists an outright condemnation of Mary Lick's behavior, the novel does problematize the use of economic and emotional coercion to induce individuals to undergo physical alteration as a solution to social inequalities. As we develop the technology to effect increasingly radical transformations of the body and more sophisticated forms of prosthetic identity that promise its transcendence, *Geek Love* suggests that history will become more—and not less—important. If we no longer have recourse to nature or essence to make ethical claims about the body, the continual retelling of tales and tails becomes our only means of working through the past to invest our bodies with the weight of history and memory.

#### NOTES

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1. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. and ed. H. M. Parshley (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952), 301.

2. Donna Haraway, "The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others," in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992), 295–337.

3. Katherine Dunn, *Geek Love* (New York: Warner, 1989), 20. All subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.

4. Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking* (New York: Routledge, 1989), ix.

5. *Ibid.*, 20.

6. See Patricia J. Williams, *Alchemy of Race and Rights: Diary of a Law Professor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991); Lauren Berlant, "America, 'Fat,' the Fetus," *Boundary 2* 21, no. 3 (Fall 1994): 144–95; Susan Bordo, "Are Mothers Persons? Reproductive Rights and the Politics of Subjectivity," in *Unbearable Weight: Women, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California

Press, 1993), 71-98; Linda Singer, "Reproductive Regulations in the Age of Sexual Epidemic," in *Erotic Welfare: Sexual Theory and Politics in an Age of Epidemic* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 88-99; Iris Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

7. Williams, *Alchemy of Race and Rights*, 104.

8. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1977), 26.

9. Most historical information on sideshows cited here is indebted to Robert Bogdan's *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

10. *Ibid.*, 20.

11. Feminist critics attuned to the dangers of new reproductive technologies have argued that opportunities for increased reproductive capacity are typically marketed toward wealthy, white families, while poor and minority women are encouraged to use birth control or permanent sterilization. See, e.g., Bordo, "Are Mothers Persons?"; Linda Singer, "Bodies-Pleasures-Powers," *Erotic Welfare: Sexual Theory and Politics in an Age of Epidemic* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 113-30.

12. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 89.

13. See Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917), *Standard Edition*, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1957), 14:237-58. This concept has more recently been taken up by critics interested in the relationship between mourning and history, individual and collective trauma, such as Carl Gutiérrez-Jones, *Rethinking the Borderlands between Chicano Culture and Legal Discourse* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Dominic LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994); Constance Penley, "Spaced Out: Remembering Christa McAuliff," *Camera Obscura* 29 (May 1992): 179-214.

14. Lauren Berlant, "National Brands/National Bodies," in *Comparative American Identities*, ed. Hortense Spillers (New York: Routledge, 1991), 113-14.

15. Don Ross, "Chizevski Bashing Unwarranted," *Muscular Development*, February 1994, 189. This article participates in the ongoing debate over whether the ideal for female bodybuilders should be large size or a more stereotypically feminine shape. As bodybuilding is a sport designed to enhance particularly masculine traits, the standards for female competitors continue to be hotly contested.

16. Sam Fussell, "Bodybuilder Americanus," *Michigan Quarterly* 32, no. 4 (Fall 1993): 578.

17. Describing the process the bodybuilder undergoes to become "a self-willed grotesque," Fussell offers yet another trope on Beauvoir's famous quote: "Bodybuilders are made, not born, and they are years in the making" (*ibid.*, 583).

18. N. Katherine Hayles has read the novel's recurrent focus on reproduction as thematizing postmodern anxiety about the potential of advanced genetic science to alter human DNA codes. Although her analysis highlights the novel's concern with the uneasy relationship between technology and the human body, it surprisingly neglects to connect the anxiety about reproduction with domination of and violence against the female body. "Postmodern Parataxis: Embodied Texts, Weightless Information," *American Literary History* 2, no. 3 (Fall 1990): 394-421.

19. Leslie Fiedler's salacious account of the universal appeal of Siamese twins affirms this male fantasy: "In all ages, joined twins have evoked erotic fantasies in their audience, since they suggest inevitably the possibility of multiple-fornication—or at least the impossibility of sexual privacy." *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), 206.

20. Anne McClintock, "Screwing the System: Sexwork, Race, and the Law," *Boundary 2* 19, no. 2 (Summer 1992): 94.

21. For more on the problematic focus on "choice" within debates over reproductive politics, see Bordo, "Are Mothers Persons?" 93.

22. Luce Irigaray, "Women on the Market," in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 181.

23. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Michael Moon, "Divinity: A Dossier, a Performance Piece, a Little Understood Emotion," in *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 217.

24. See, e.g., Rosi Braidotti, "Organs without Bodies," *Differences* 1 (Winter 1989): 147-61; Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Hayles, "Postmodern Parataxis."

25. Susan Bordo, "Material Girl: The Effacements of Postmodern Culture," in *Unbearable Weight: Women, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 245.

26. Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, and Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 93.

27. Contrast this with the 1995 Academy Award-winning film, *Forrest Gump*, and the way that its freaks—Lieutenant Dan, Bubba, Jenny, and Forrest himself—are ultimately normalized, written back into a bland story about America that takes the most charged moments in recent history and rewrites them to erase their political content.