

part ii  
*bodies*

# freaks and queers

## I. NAMING

*Handicapped.* A disabled person sits on the street, begging for her next meal. This is how we survived in Europe and the United States as cities grew big and the economy moved from a land base to an industrial base. We were beggars, caps in hand. This is how some of us still survive. Seattle, 1989: a white man sits on the sidewalk, leaning against an iron fence. He smells of whiskey and urine, his body wrapped in torn cloth. His legs are toothpick-thin, knees bent inward. Beside him leans a set of crutches. A Styrofoam cup, half full of coins, sits on the sidewalk in front of him. Puget Sound stretches out behind him, water sparkling in the sun. Tourists bustle by. He strains his head up, trying to catch their eyes. Cap in hand. *Handicapped.*<sup>1</sup>

*Disabled.* The car stalled in the left lane of traffic is disabled. Or alternatively, the broad stairs curving into a public building disable the man in a wheelchair. That word used as a noun (the *disabled* or people with *disabilities*), an adjective (*disabled* people), a verb (the

accident *disabled* her): in all its forms it means “unable,” but where does our inability lie? Are our bodies like stalled cars? Or does disability live in the social and physical environment, in the stairs that have no accompanying ramp? I think about language. I often call nondisabled people able-bodied, or when I’m feeling confrontational, *temporarily* able-bodied. But if I call myself disabled in order to describe how the ableist world treats me as a person with cerebral palsy, then shouldn’t I call nondisabled people *enabled*? That word locates the condition of being nondisabled, not in the nondisabled body, but in the world’s reaction to that body. This is not a semantic game.

*Cripple.* The woman who walks with a limp, the kid who uses braces, the man with gnarly hands hear the word *cripple* every day in a hostile nondisabled world. At the same time, we in the disability rights movement create *crip* culture, tell *crip* jokes, identify a sensibility we call *crip* humor. Nancy Mairs writes:

I am a cripple. I choose this word to name me.... People—crippled or not—wince at the word *cripple*, as they do not at *handicapped* or *disabled*. Perhaps I want them to wince. I want them to see me as a tough customer, one to whom the fates/gods/viruses have not been kind, but who can face the brutal truth of her existence squarely. As a cripple, I swaggar.<sup>1</sup>

*Gimp.* Slang meaning “to limp.” *Gimp* comes from the word *gammy*, which hobos in the 18th century used among themselves to describe dangerous or unwelcoming places. Hobo to hobo, passing on the road: “Don’t go there. It’s gammy.” Insider language, hobo solidarity. And now a few centuries later, one disabled person greets another, “Hey, gimp. How ya doin?” Insider language, gimp solidarity.

*Retard.* I learned early that words could bruise a body. I have been called *retard* too many times, that word sliding off the tongues of doctors, classmates, neighbors, teachers, well-meaning strangers on the street. In the years before my speech became understandable, I was universally assumed to be “mentally retarded.” When I started school, the teachers wanted me in the “special education” program.

My parents insisted I be given yet another set of diagnostic tests, including an IQ test, and I—being a white kid who lived in a house full of books, ideas, and grammar-school English, being a disabled kid who had finally learned how to talk—scored well. They let me join the “regular” first grade. I worked overtime to prove those test results right. Still I was *retard*, *monkey*, *defect* on the playground, in the streets, those words hurled at my body, accompanied by rocks and rubber erasers. Even at home, I heard their echoes. My father told me more than once to stop walking like a *monkey*. My mother often talked about my birth *defect*. Words bruise a body more easily than rocks and rubber erasers.

*Differently abled*, *physically challenged*. Nondisabled people, wanting to cushion us from the cruelty of language, invented these euphemisms. In explaining her choice of the word *cripple*, Nancy Mairs writes:

*Differently abled* ... partakes of the same semantic hopefulness that transformed countries from *undeveloped* to *underdeveloped*, then to *less developed*, and finally *developing* nations. People have continued to starve in those countries during the shift. Some realities do not obey the dictates of language.<sup>3</sup>

*Differently abled* is simply easier to say, easier to think about than *disabled* or *handicapped* or *crippled*.

*Freak*. I hold fast to my dictionary, but the definitions slip and slide, tell half stories. I have to stop here. *Freak* forces me to think about naming.

*Handicapped*, *disabled*, *cripple*, *gimp*, *retard*, *differently abled*. I understand my relationship to each of these words. I scoff at *handicapped*, a word I grew up believing my parents had invented specifically to describe me, my parents who were deeply ashamed of my cerebral palsy and desperately wanted to find a cure. I use the word *disabled* as an adjective to name what this ableist world does to us crips and gimps. *Cripple* makes me flinch; it too often accompanied the sticks and stones on my grade school playground, but I love crip humor, the audacity of turning *cripple* into a word of pride.

*Gimp* sings a friendly song, full of irony and understanding. *Retard* on the other hand draws blood every time, a sharp, sharp knife. In the world as it should be, maybe disabled people would be *differently abled*: a world where Braille and audio-recorded editions of books and magazines were a matter of course, and hearing people signed ASL; a world where schools were fully integrated, health care, free and unrationed; a world where universal access meant exactly that; a world where disabled people were not locked up at home or in nursing homes, relegated to sheltered employment and paid sweatshop wages. But, in the world as it is, *differently abled*, *physically challenged* tell a wishful lie.

*Handicapped, disabled, cripple, gimp, retard, differently abled, freak.* I need to stop here. *Freak* I don't understand. It unsettles me. I don't quite like it, can't imagine using it as some politicized disabled people do. Yet I want *freak* to be as easy as the words *queer* and *cripple*.

*Queer*, like *cripple*, is an ironic and serious word I use to describe myself and others in my communities. *Queer* speaks volumes about who I am, my life as a dyke, my relationship to the dominant culture. Because of when I came out—more than a decade after the Stonewall Rebellion—and where—into a highly politicized urban dyke community—*queer* has always been easy for me. I adore its defiant external edge, its comfortable internal truth. *Queer* belongs to me. So does *cripple* for many of the same reasons. *Queer* and *cripple* are cousins: words to shock, words to infuse with pride and self-love, words to resist internalized hatred, words to help forge a politics. They have been gladly chosen—*queer* by many gay, lesbian, bi, and trans peoples, *cripple*, or *crip*, by many disabled people.

*Freak* is another story. Unlike *queer* and *crip*, it has not been widely embraced in my communities.<sup>4</sup> For me *freak* has a hurtful, scary edge; it takes *queer* and *cripple* one step too far; it doesn't feel good or liberating.

This profusion of words and their various relationships to marginalized people and politicized communities fascinates me.

Which words get embraced, which don't, and why? *Queer* but not *pervert*. *Cripple*, and sometimes *freak*, but not *retard*. Like most of the ugly and demeaning words used to batter and bait marginalized peoples—racist, sexist, classist, ableist, homophobic slurs—*pervert* and *retard* nearly burst with hurt and bitterness, anger and reminders of self-hatred.<sup>5</sup> I doubt LGBT communities and the disability communities respectively will ever claim those words as our own. In contrast *crip*, *queer*, and *freak* have come to sit on a cusp. For some of us, they carry too much grief. For others, they can be chosen with glee and pride. *Queer* and *crip* are mine but not *freak*, and I want to know why. What is it about that word? What bitterness, what pain, does it hold that *cripple*, with its connotations of pitiful, broken bodies, and *queer*, with its sweeping definitions of normality and abnormality, do not? I want to unravel *freak*, to pull on the thread called history.\*

## II. FREAK SHOW

The history of freakdom extends far back into western civilization. The court jester, the pet dwarf, the exhibition of humans in Renaissance England, the myths of giants, minotaurs, and monsters all point to this long history, which reached a pinnacle in the mid-1800s to mid-1900s. During that century, freaks were big entertainment and big business. Freak shows populated the United

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\* Since 1999, I've been taken to task by folks in BDSM and leather communities more than once for my analysis of the word *pervert*. In my 1999 endnotes, I try to soften my analysis by claiming that the word hasn't been "used to construct both individual and communal identities." But my reasoning is exactly wrong when seen from inside BDSM communities where claiming *pervert* has in truth been central to building a communal identity. The ways I have misread the word as an outsider to the BDSM world is a great example of how reclaiming the ugly words has so much to do with context. My original intent to find words in LGBT communities that were analogous to the word *retard* in disability communities becomes extraordinarily complex.—E.C., 2009

States, and people flocked to the circus, the carnival, the storefront dime museum. They came to gawk at “freaks,” “savages,” and “geeks.” They came to be educated and entertained, titillated and repulsed. They came to have their ideas of normal and abnormal, superior and inferior, their sense of self, confirmed and strengthened. And gawk they did. But who were they gawking at? This is where I want to start.

Whatever these paying customers—*rubes* in circus lingo—believed, they were not staring at freaks of nature. Rather, the freak show tells the story of an elaborate and calculated social construction that utilized performance and fabrication as well as deeply held cultural beliefs. At the center of this construction is the showman, who, using costuming, staging, elaborate fictional histories, marketing, and choreography, turned people from four groups into freaks. First, disabled people, both white people and people of color, became Armless Wonders, Frog Men, Giants, Midgets, Pinheads, Camel Girls, Wild Men of Borneo, and the like. Second, nondisabled people of color—bought, persuaded, forced, and kidnapped to the United States from colonized countries all over the world—became Cannibals and Savages. Third, nondisabled people of color from the United States became Natives from the Exotic Wilds. And fourth, nondisabled people with visible differences—bearded women, fat women, very thin men, people covered with tattoos, intersex people—became wondrous and horrifying exhibits. Cultural critic and disability theorist Rosemarie Garland Thomson argues that the differences among these sometimes overlapping groups of people melded together:

Perhaps the freak show’s most remarkable effect was to eradicate distinctions among a wide variety of bodies, conflating them under a single sign of the freak-as-other.... [A]ll the bodily characteristics that seemed different or threatening to the dominant order merged into a kind of motley chorus line of physical difference on the freak show stage.... [A] nondisabled person of color billed as the “Fiji Cannibal” was equivalent to a physically disabled Euro-American called the “Legless Wonder.”<sup>6</sup>

In the eyes of many rubes, particularly white and/or nondisabled folks, the freak show probably was one big melting pot of difference and otherness. At the same time, the differences among the various groups of people who worked as freaks remain important to understanding the freak show in its entirety. But whatever the differences, all four groups held one thing in common: nature did not make them into freaks. The freak show did, carefully constructing an exaggerated divide between “normal” and Other, sustained in turn by rubes willing to pay good money to stare.

Hiram and Barney Davis performed wildly for their audiences, snapping, snarling, talking gibberish from stage. The handbill sold in conjunction with their display described in lengthy, imagined detail “What We Know About Waino and Plutano, the Wild Men of Borneo.” In reality Hiram and Barney were white, cognitively disabled brothers from an immigrant farm family who lived in Ohio. Their mother, after many offers which she refused, finally sold them to a persistent showman for a wash pan full of gold and silver. Off-stage Hiram and Barney were quiet, unassuming men. In one photo they stand flanking their manager Hanford Lyman. Their hair falls past their shoulders; they sport neatly trimmed goatees; Hiram folds his hands in front of him; Barney cocks his hands on his hips; they look mildly and directly into the camera.

Ann Thompson, a white woman born without arms, posed as “The Armless Wonder.” From stage she signed and sold photographs as souvenirs, writing with her toes sayings like, “So you perceive it’s really true, when hands are lacking, toes will do,” or more piously, “Indolence and ease are the rust of the mind.” In her autobiography, which she hawked along with her photos and trinkets, Ann presented herself as a respectable, religious lady. In one photo, she sits beside her husband and son, all of them wearing formal Victorian clothing.

William Johnson, a cognitively disabled African American man from New Jersey, became the “What Is It?” the “missing link,” the “Monkey Man.” He wore hairy ape-like costumes, shaved his head bald except for a little tuft at the very top, and posed in front



of a jungle backdrop. The showmen at P. T. Barnum's American Museum in New York City described William as "a most singular animal, which though it has many of the features and characteristics of both the human and the brute, is not, apparently, either, but in appearance, a mixture of both—the connecting link between humanity and brute creation."<sup>7</sup> Although the way in which he came to the freak show is unknown—Barnum may have bought him at a young age and coerced him into performing at first—William died in his 80s at home, a rich and well-liked man, referred to, by his co-workers, as the "dean of freaks."

Charles Stratton, a working-class short person—*dwarf* in medical terminology—from Connecticut worked the freak show as General Tom Thumb. He played the role of a European aristocrat, complete with resplendent suits, a miniature carriage pulled by ponies, and meetings with rich and famous people around the world, becoming in the process a rich man himself. When Charles and Mercy Lavinia Warren Bump, a short woman who also worked the freak show, fell in love and decided to get married, P. T. Barnum set out, in an extravagant example of showmanship, to turn their wedding into a huge media spectacle. He was successful; 2,000 people attended the event, and the *New York Times* ran a full-page story, headlined "Loving Lilliputians." Charles and Mercy played their roles and used the publicity to springboard another European tour.

Two Congolese men and thirteen Congolese women, wearing large, heavy jewelry in their pierced lips, were bought by circus agent Ludwig Bergonnier and shipped from Africa to the United States. The poster advertising their display in the Ringling Brothers Circus freak show proclaimed them "Genuine Monster-Mouthed Ubangi Savages World's Most Weird Living Humans from Africa's Darkest Depths." The women were forced to wear only gunny sack skirts; the men, given only loincloths, carried spears. Ubangi was a name randomly pulled off a map of Africa and had no relationship to where these women and men had actually lived. Their real names and actual homeland are unknown.

The Davis brothers, Thompson, Johnson, Stratton, the now

unknown African men and women did not slide into the world as infant freaks. They were made freaks, socially constructed for the purposes of entertainment and profit. This construction depended not only upon the showmanship of the “freaks” and their managers. It also capitalized on the eagerness of rubes to gawk at freaks and on the ableism and racism, which made the transitions from disabled white person, disabled person of color, nondisabled person of color, to freak even possible. Without this pair of oppressive ideologies, the attendant fear and hatred of all disabled people and all people of color, and the desire to create an Other against whom one could gauge her/his normality, who could ever believe for even one farcical moment that William Johnson was Darwin’s missing link; Barney Davis, a wild man from Borneo; Ann Thompson, an armless wonder?

*Ann, in that photo of you with your husband and son, you sit on a rug decorated with crosses, a rug you crocheted. The showmen made a big deal of your dexterity. But did you learn to crochet as a freak show stunt? Or did you, like so many women of your time, sew and knit, embroider and crochet, simply as a necessity and a pastime?*

Within this context of ableism and racism, the people who worked the freak show did not live only as victims. Many of the “freaks” themselves—particularly those who were not cognitively disabled or brought to the United States from Africa, Asia, South and Central America, the Pacific islands, and the Caribbean—controlled their own acts and displays, working alongside their managers to shape profitable shows. Many of them made decent livings; some, like Charles Stratton, Mercy Lavinia Warren Bump, and William Johnson, even became wealthy. When P. T. Barnum lost all his money in a bad business deal, Stratton came out of semi-retirement and rescued him by agreeing to go on yet another lucrative European tour. Others, like the Hilton sisters, conjoined twins who worked in the mid-1900s, became their own managers, or, like Bump and her Lilliputian Opera Company, formed their own performing groups, which were employed by dime museums and traveling vaudeville companies. In other words, white, nondisabled freak show owners

and managers didn't only exploit "their freaks." The two groups also colluded together to dupe the audience, to make a buck off the rube's gullibility. Within the subculture of the freak show, rubes were understood as exploited victims—explicitly lied to, charged outrageous sums for mere trinkets, pickpocketed, or merely given incorrect change at the ticket counter.

*Charles, there is a picture of you, taken during a visit with the Queen of England. You have a miniature sword drawn and are staging a fight with a poodle. Your wife, Mercy, writes of embarrassment and outrage. Of presidential candidate Stephen Douglas, she remembers: "He expressed great pleasure at again seeing me, and as I stood before him he took my hand and, drawing me toward him, stooped to kiss me. I instinctively drew back, feeling my face suffused with blushes. It seemed impossible to make people at first understand that I was not a child."<sup>8</sup> Did you share her embarrassment and outrage as you faced that poodle? Or did you and Barnum laugh long and hard as you concocted your stunts?*



The questions about exploitation are complicated; simple answers collapse easily. Robert Bogdan in his history *Freak Show* excerpts a letter he received from freak show manager Ward Hall: "I exhibited freaks and exploited them for years. Now you are going to exploit them. The difference between authors and the news media, and the freak show operators is that we paid them." Bogdan comments, "[Hall's] use of the word *exploit* was playful. He does not think he exploited them. He had a business relationship, complete with contract, with his troupe of human oddities. His livelihood depended on them, as theirs did on him. He had no pretensions of doing good...."<sup>9</sup> Although Bogdan chronicles the social construction of freaks in amazing detail and refuses to situate the people who worked the freak shows as passive victims, I believe he is reaching toward a simple answer to the question of exploitation.

Hall's exploitation of people who worked as freaks may not

have revolved around ableism and racism. Maybe he wasn't acting out of fear and hatred of disabled people and people of color, out of his internal psychological sense and the external legislated reality of privilege. And then again, maybe he was. But most certainly, like all the people who profited from the freak show, he used ableism and racism to his benefit. This use of oppression by white, nondisabled businessmen is common, fraught, and ultimately unacceptable. In his letter, Hall explicitly casts himself as a boss exploiting his workers, placing the freak show within the context of capitalism. Bogdan defends Hall in a backhanded way when he writes: "[Hall] had no pretensions of doing good." But since when do bosses in most profit-making business have real pretensions of doing good by their workers? Doing good may be a byproduct of making profit, but only a byproduct. Is Hall any less exploitative because he was acting as a boss rather than, or in addition to, a racist white person and an ableist nondisabled person?

Any estimation of exploitation in the freak show needs to also include Hall and "his troupe of human oddities" colluding together to exploit the rube. Sometimes this exploitation carried with it a sense of absurdity, a sense that the rubes would believe anything, that they were simple, gullible fools. Other times this exploitation was pure thievery, the sideshow creating situations in which it was easy to steal the rube's money. But to cast the audience only as victim neglects the very real ways in which the freak show bolstered white people's and nondisabled people's sense of superiority and well-being. The social construction of freaks always relied upon the perceived gap between a rube's normality and a freak's abnormality. Unsurprisingly, normality was defined exclusively in terms of whiteness and able-bodiedness.

The complexities of exploitation pile up, layer upon layer. White people and nondisabled people used racism and ableism to turn a profit. The freak show managers and owners were bosses and as such had power over their workers, the people who worked as freaks. Boss and worker together consciously manipulated their audience. That same audience willingly used lies to strengthen its

own self-image. Given this maze of relationships, I have trouble accepting the assessment that exploitation in the freak show, if it existed at all, wasn't truly serious. Rather, I believe it exerted influence in many directions.

Working as a freak never meant working in a respectful, liberating environment, but then disabled people had no truly respectful and liberating options available to them in the mid-1800s. They could beg in the streets. They could survive in almshouses, where, as reformer Dorothea Dix put it, mentally ill people and developmentally disabled people lived "in cages, closets, cellars, stalls, pens! Chained naked, beaten with rods, and lashed into obedience."<sup>10</sup> They could live behind closed doors with their families. Consider William Johnson. As a Black, cognitively disabled man who apparently had no surviving family, he had few options. P. T. Barnum found William's counterpart, the woman displayed as the female "What Is It?," abandoned in an outhouse, covered with shit, left to die. In a world such as this, where the freak show existed alongside the street, the almshouse, the outhouse, William's position as the "dean of freaks," although dehumanizing in a number of ways, doesn't look so bad.

*William, late after the exhibits had closed, the rubes gone home, did you and your friends gather backstage to party, passing a bottle of whiskey round and round? Did you entertain some more, pull out your fiddle and play silly squeaky songs? Or did you sit back and listen to one joke after another until you were breathless with laughter?*

In many ways working as a freak was similar to working as a prostitute. Cultural worker and working-class scholar Joe Kadi writes, "Left-wing working-class analysis ... situates prostitution within the context of capitalism (one more *really* lousy job), celebrates the women who survive, thumbs its nose at the moralistic middle-class attitudes that condemn without understanding, and relays the women's stories and perspectives."<sup>11</sup> This same theoretical and political framework can be used to examine the job of freak. Clearly, working as a freak meant working a lousy job, many times the *only* job available, in a hostile ableist and racist world. Some-

times the job was lousier than others. The African women and men who performed as "Ubangi savages" made a nickel on every photograph they sold, nothing else; whereas their manager, Ludwig Bergonnier, made \$1,500 a week renting "his display" to the Ringling Brothers Circus. In contrast, Charles Stratton became rich, owning a horse farm and a yacht. Still others, like William Johnson, found community among the people who worked the freak show.

*You who ended up in the history books named only "Ubangi Savages," no names of your own: night after night, you paraded around the circus tent, air sticky against your bare skin, burlap prickly against your covered skin. Did you come to hate Bergonnier?*

What did the people who worked as freaks think of their jobs, their lives? I want to hear their stories, but like the stories of other marginalized people, they were most often never told, but rather eaten up, thrown away, lost in the daily grind of survival. Some of these people didn't read or write, due to their particular disabilities or to the material/social circumstances of their lives. Or, as in the case of many of the people brought here from other countries, they didn't speak English and/or didn't come from cultures that passed stories through the written word. A few people who worked the freak show did write autobiographies, but these pamphlets or books were mostly part of the whole production, sold alongside the handbills and photos. These stories ended up being part of the showmen's hyperbole. So, in order to reconstruct, celebrate, and understand the lives of the people who worked the freak show, I rely on historians, like Robert Bogdan, who have sifted through thousands of handbills, posters, newspaper articles, and promotional garbage used to create *The Armless Wonder*, *The Wild Men of Borneo*. In large part, I will never truly know their lives but can only use my imagination, political sensibilities, and intuition to fill the holes between the outrageous headlines in the *New York Times* and other newspapers and the outrageous handbills sold at the carnival.

The historians who moralize about the freak show frustrate me. These academics will take a detail, like the fact that Hiram and

Barney Davis's mother sold her sons to a showman, and use it to demonstrate just how despicable showmen could be and how oppressive the freak show was. The disturbing fact that many of the people who worked as freaks—disabled people from the United States<sup>12</sup> as well as people from colonized countries—were sold into the business needs to be examined. The question, why were they sold, has to be asked. Certainly, in many cases, the answer must revolve around fear and hatred, undiluted ableism and racism, imperialism, and capitalism. But consider Hiram and Barney. They were sold for a wash pan full of gold and silver. What did that wash pan mean to their mother, Catherine Davis? My sources suggest, although don't explicitly state, that the Davises were a *poor* immigrant farm family. Did that gold and silver mean economic survival to Catherine Davis? What happened to working-class and poor disabled people who needed care but whose families could not provide it? The options did not abound: the almshouse, the street, the freak show. Rather than moralize and condemn, I want freak show historians to examine the whole context, including racism, ableism, and classism, and begin to build a complex understanding of exploitation. Like the women Joe Kadi refers to in his analysis of prostitution, the people who worked as freaks—especially those who had some control over their own display—grasped an exploitative situation in an exploitative world and, as often as possible, turned it to their benefit.

At the same time, the people who had the least power in the freak show—people from colonized countries and cognitively disabled people—underscore just how exploitative this institution could be. Many of the people of color brought to the United States died bleak deaths of pneumonia, pleurisy, or tuberculosis. They died on the long ship rides. They died wanting desperately to return to their home countries. They did not want to be part of the freak show; they never came to like the freak show; they didn't become showmen and -women in their own right. Instead, the circus, the dime museum, the vaudeville act, the natural history museum were simply sites of imperialist atrocity. Likewise, cognitively dis-

abled people most frequently had no control over their displays. Some lacked the abilities to say yes or no to their own exhibition; others were simply trapped by unscrupulous managers, who typically were also their legal guardians. Although some cognitively disabled people had what appear to be good and happy relationships with their managers, the dual role of showman and legal guardian is a setup for exploitation.

The display of both groups of people capitalized on the theory of the time that nondisabled people of color and cognitively disabled people embodied the missing link between primates and humans. Eminent zoologist Baron Georges Cuvier wrote in the early 1800s:

The negro race is confined to the south of Mount Atlas. Its characteristics are, black complexion, woolly hair, compressed cranium, and flattish nose. In the prominence of the lower part of the face, and the thickness of the lips, it manifestly approaches the monkey tribe.<sup>13</sup>

Much the same was believed about cognitively disabled people. Following the same train of thought as Cuvier, German scientist Carl Vogt wrote in 1867 even more explicitly about evolutionary theory:

Microcephalics [people with a type of cognitive disability medically known as microcephalia] must necessarily represent an earlier developmental state of the human being ... they reveal to us one of the milestones which the human passed by during the course of his historical evolution.<sup>14</sup>

The racism and ableism imbedded in these theories intersect intensely in the exhibition of cognitively disabled people of color. Consider the story of two cognitively disabled siblings kidnapped as children from San Salvador. Called “Maximo” and “Bartola,” they were declared to be from “a long-lost race of Aztecs.” Scientists and anthropologists studied them; showmen displayed them. Both groups helped create and defend the “long-lost race” fabrication,



anthropologists to substantiate their theories, showmen to make money, each feeding off the other. They used a variety of observations as their proof. They emphasized physical attributes associated with being disabled by microcephalia, particularly short stature and a slightly sloping skull. They took note of “Maximo’s” and “Bartola’s” dark skin and thick black hair. They made much of their subjects’ language use and food preferences, citing the cultural differences between “civilized” white people and “barbaric” people of color. They exaggerated the specific cognitive impairments of “Maximo” and “Bartola.” In short, these white, nondisabled men totally intertwined race and disability, racism and ableism, to create “their freaks.”

In one set of photos, “Maximo” and “Bartola” are stripped naked, posed against a blank wall. I imagine scientists measuring the diameter of their skulls, the length of their legs, taking notes about their skin color and speech patterns, then snapping these pictures to add to their documentation. A second set of photos has them sitting against a stone wall. “Maximo” wears striped pants and a shirt with a big sun on its front. “Bartola’s” dress has a zig-zag design woven through it. Their hair is teased into big, wild afros. “Maximo” looks dazedly beyond the camera; “Bartola” looks down. I imagine showmen carefully arranging their props, calculating their profits. There are no complex or ambiguous answers here to the questions of power, control, and exploitation.

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During the freak show’s heyday, today’s dominant model of disability—the medical model—did not yet exist. This model defines disability as a personal problem, curable and/or treatable by the medical establishment, which in turn has led to the wholesale medicalization of disabled people. As theorist Michael Oliver puts it:

Doctors are centrally involved in the lives of disabled people from the determination of whether a foetus is handicapped or not through to

the deaths of old people from a variety of disabling conditions. Some of these involvements are, of course, entirely appropriate, as in the diagnosis of impairment, the stabilisation of medical condition after trauma, the treatment of illness occurring independent of disability, and the provision of physical rehabilitation. But doctors are also involved in assessing driving ability, prescribing wheelchairs, determining the allocation of financial benefits, selecting educational provision and measuring work capabilities and potential; in none of these cases is it immediately obvious that medical training and qualifications make doctors the most appropriate persons to be so involved.<sup>15</sup>

In the centuries before medicalization, before the 1930s and '40s when disability became a pathology and the exclusive domain of doctors and hospitals, the Christian western world had encoded disability with many different meanings. Disabled people had sinned. We lacked moral strength. We were the spawn of the devil or the product of god's will. Our bodies/minds reflected events that happened during our mothers' pregnancies.

At the time of the freak show, disabled people were, in the minds of nondisabled people, extraordinary creatures, not entirely human, about whom everyone—"professional" people and the general public alike—was curious. Doctors routinely robbed the graves of "giants" in order to measure their skeletons and place them in museums. Scientists described disabled people in terms like "female, belonging to the monocephalic, ileadelphic class of monsters by fusion,"<sup>16</sup> language that came from the "science" of teratology, the centuries-old study of monsters. Anthropologists studied disabled people with an eye toward evolutionary theory. Rubes paid good money to gawk.

*Hiram, did you ever stop mid-performance, stop up there on your dime museum platform and stare back, turning your mild and direct gaze back on the rubes, gawking at the gawkers, entertained by your own audience?*

At the same time, there were signs of the move toward medicalization. Many people who worked as freaks were examined by doctors. Often handbills included the testimony of a doctor who verified the "authenticity" of the "freak" and sometimes explained

the causes of his or her “freakishness.” Tellingly doctors performed this role, rather than anthropologists, priests, or philosophers. But for the century in which the freak show flourished, disability was not yet inextricably linked to pathology, and without pathology, pity and tragedy did not shadow disability to the same extent they do today.

Consequently, the freak show fed upon neither of these, relying instead on voyeurism. The “armless wonder” played the fiddle on stage; the “giant” lived as royalty; the “savage” roared and screamed. These performances didn’t create freaks as pitiful or tragic but as curious, odd, surprising, horrifying, wondrous. Freaks were not supercrips. They did not *overcome* disability; they *flaunted* it. Nor were freaks poster children, the modern-day objects of pity, used to raise money on the telethon stage. Instead, the freaks performed, and the rubes gawked. In a culture that paired disability and curiosity, voyeurism was morally acceptable. Thus, people flocked without shame or compunction to see the “freaks,” primed by cultural beliefs about disability to be duped by the lies and fabrications created at the freak show.

In the same way, cultural beliefs about race— notions about the “wild savage,” the “noble savage,” and an eagerness to see both—made the exhibition of nondisabled people of color at the freak show and other venues extraordinarily profitable. Take for example the display of Filipino people at the 1904 World’s Fair in St. Louis. The exhibit was billed as the “Igorot Village,” complete with mostly naked women and men dancing wildly and eating dog stew. One among many “anthropological” displays at the Fair, the Village, as a near perfect representation of the “wild savage,” attracted by far the most Fair-goers and media attention. Christopher Vaughan in his article “Ogling Igorots” writes:

The “civilized” Visayans, despite offering hourly theatrical and orchestral performances—concluding with “The Star Spangled Banner,” sung in English by the entire village—went relatively ignored in comparison with the Igorots.... Gate receipts at the Igorot concession nearly quadrupled the total for the Visayans and tripled that of the colorful Moros.<sup>17</sup>

It was all too easy for white people to gawk at people of color, using the image of dog-eating savages from far-away “uncivilized” islands both to create and strengthen their sense of white identity and white superiority.

During this same period of time, imperialism had intensified to a fevered pitch, both abroad in places like the Philippines and at home as white people continued to subjugate and destroy Native peoples and cultures. By the time of the 1904 World’s Fair, the United States had won the Spanish-American War and gained control over the Philippines. In explaining his decision to solidify the United States’ colonial rule there, President McKinley referred to “our civilizing mission.” What better way to justify that mission, than to display Filipino people as “uncivilized savages”?

This interplay between politics and the freak show also occurred on the national level. For instance, the missing-link evolutionary theory, used so profitably by showmen, supported slavery before Emancipation and the suppression of civil rights after. But the freak show didn’t only *use* this ideology. The display of Black and white cognitively disabled people and nondisabled people of color as the “missing link” and the “What Is It?” actually bolstered the theory. The scientists and politicians could point to William Johnson and say, “See, here is living proof. Look at this creature.” In doing so, they were reaffirming the less-than-human status of people of color and rationalizing much of their social and political policy. Simply put, the freak show both fed upon and gave fuel to imperialism, domestic racist politics, and the cultural beliefs about “wild savages” and white superiority.

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The decline of the freak show in the early decades of the 20th century coincided with the medicalization of disability. As pity, tragedy, and medical diagnosis/treatment entered the picture, the novelty and mystery of disability dissipated. Explicit voyeurism stopped being socially acceptable except when controlled by the

medical establishment. And later in the 20th century, as colonized people of color fought back successfully against their colonizers and as legal segregation in the United States ended and civil rights started to take hold, the exhibition of people of color also became, at least ostensibly, unacceptable. Along with these changes came a scorn for the freak show as an oppressive institution from the bad old days. But I'm not so sure the freak show is all that dead.

Consider Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gomez-Peña's performance piece "The Couple in the Cage," created in 1992 as part of the "500 Years of Resistance" celebration.<sup>18</sup> Fusco and Gomez-Peña costumed themselves in everything from false leopard skins to mirrored sunglasses and posed as native people from a newly discovered tribe. They toured natural history museums, art galleries, and street corners in a cage, performing the script of exotic and noble "savages." In the long tradition of showmen and -women, they even invented an island in the Gulf of Mexico from which they supposedly came and, as they toured, didn't let on to their ruse. Fusco and Gomez-Peña expected their audiences to immediately recognize the parody. Instead, as documented in a video shot at the scene of several performances<sup>19</sup> many people apparently took the ruse seriously. Some people expressed shock and disgust. Others, particularly white people, expounded on their theories about why Fusco paced back and forth, why Gomez-Peña grunted, staring out at the audience. Still others paid 50 cents for Polaroid pictures of the "savages" posed at their bars. Whether these people were serious, whether they all left the performance sites still duped, whether they truly believed their own theories, is not clear. But at least to some extent, it appears that "The Couple in the Cage" easily replicated the relationship between rube and freak—even as there are significant differences between this performance art piece and the freak show—suggesting that the old images of race, rather than being dead, live painfully close to the surface.

The scorn for the freak show also assumes that the bad old days were really awful, but I'm not so sure that they were in actuality all that bad for some of the "freaks." Listen to the stories

Robert Waldow and Violet and Daisy Hilton tell. All of them lived during the freak show's decline as medicalization took hold.

Robert Waldow, a tall man born in the 1920s, resisted becoming a giant, a freak. He wanted to be a lawyer, but unable to get the necessary education, he turned to shoe advertising. And later, after being pursued for years by showmen, he worked for the circus, earning a large salary and refusing to participate in the hype that would have made him appear taller than he really was. At the same time, doctors also pursued Robert, reporting him to be the tallest man in the world—this being medical hype, not circus hype. They refused to leave him alone. In 1936 a Dr. Charles Humberd showed up uninvited at the Waldow's home. Robert refused a physical exam and wouldn't cooperate with the interview. Humberd left disgruntled and the next year, unbeknownst to the Waldows, published an article in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* called, "Giantism: A Case Study," in which Robert became a case study of a "preacromegalic giant." Because of the article, which cast him as a surly brute, Robert and his family were deluged with unwelcome attention from the media, the general public, and the medical establishment. In the biography *The Gentleman Giant*, Waldow's father reveals that Robert was far more disturbed and angered by his dealings with doctors than with showmen.

Conjoined twins Daisy and Violet Hilton echo this reaction. These women worked the circus, carnival, and vaudeville circuits from the time they could talk. Early on, their abusive guardians controlled and managed the show. They would lock Daisy and Violet away for days at a time to ensure that no one but rubes paying good money could see them. Later, after a court order freed the sisters, they performed on their own. The cover of one publicity pamphlet has Daisy playing the saxophone, Violet, the piano, and both of them smiling cheerfully at the viewer. Much of their lives they spent fighting poverty as the freak show's popularity waned. And yet in their autobiography, they write about "loath[ing] the very tone of the medical man's voice" and fearing that their guardians would "stop showing us on stage and let the doctors have us to

punch and pinch and take our picture always.”<sup>20</sup> Try telling Robert Waldow and the Hilton sisters how enlightened today’s medical model of disability is, how much more progressive it is than the freak show, how bad the bad old days were. Try telling Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gomez-Peña that the freak show is truly dead.



The end of the freak show meant the end of a particular kind of employment for the people who had worked as freaks. For non-disabled people of color from the United States, employment by the 1930s didn’t hinge heavily on the freak show, and so its decline didn’t have a huge impact. And for people from Africa, Asia, South and Central America, the Pacific islands, and the Caribbean, the decline meant only that white people had one less reason to come kidnap and buy people away from their homes. But for disabled people—both people of color and white people—the end of the freak show almost guaranteed unemployment, disability often being codified into law as the inability to work.

In the ’30s when Franklin Roosevelt’s work programs employed many people, the federal government explicitly deemed disabled people unable to work, stamping their work applications “P. H. Physically handicapped. Substandard. Unemployable,” sending them home with small monthly checks. The League of the Physically Handicapped protested in Washington, DC, occupying the Work Progress Administration’s offices, chanting, “We want jobs, not tin cups.”<sup>21</sup> In this climate, as freak show jobs disappeared, many disabled people faced a world devoid of employment opportunities.

Listen for instance to Otis Jordan, a disabled African American man who works the Sutton Sideshow, one of the only remaining freak shows in the country, as “Otis the Frog Man.” In 1984, his exhibit was banned from the New York State Fair when someone lodged a complaint about the indignities of displaying disabled people. Otis responded, “Hell, what does she [the woman who

made the complaint] want from me—to be on welfare?”<sup>22</sup> Working as a freak may have been a lousy job, but nonetheless it was a job.

### III. PRIDE

Now with this history in hand, can I explain why the word *freak* unsettles me, why I have not embraced this piece of disability history, this story of disabled people who earned their livings by flaunting their disabilities, this heritage of resistance, an in-your-face resistance similar to “We’re here, we’re queer, get used to it”? Why doesn’t the word *freak* connect me easily and directly to subversion? The answer I think lies in the transition from freak show to doctor’s office, from curiosity to pity, from entertainment to pathology. The end of the freak show didn’t mean the end of our display or the end of voyeurism. We simply traded one kind of freakdom for another.

Take for instance public stripping, the medical practice of stripping disabled children to their underwear and examining them in front of large groups of doctors, medical students, physical therapists, and rehabilitation specialists. They have the child walk back and forth. They squeeze her muscles. They watch his gait, muscle tension, footfall, back curvature. They take notes and talk among themselves about what surgeries and therapies they might recommend. Since the invention of video cameras, they tape the sessions. They justify public stripping by saying it’s a training tool for students, a way for a team of professionals to pool knowledge.<sup>23</sup> This isn’t a medical practice of decades gone by. As recently as 1996, disability activist Lisa Blumberg reported in *The Disability Rag* that “specialty” clinics (cerebral palsy clinics, spina bifida clinics, muscular dystrophy clinics, etc.) at a variety of teaching hospitals regularly schedule group—rather than private—examinations and conduct surgery screenings in hospital amphitheaters.<sup>24</sup> Excuse me, but isn’t public stripping exactly what scientists and anthropologists did to “Maximo” and “Bartola” a century ago? Tell me, what is the difference between the freak show and public stripping? Which is more



degrading? Which takes more control away from disabled people? Which lets a large group of nondisabled people gawk unabashedly for free?

Today's freakdom happens in hospitals and doctors' offices. It happens during telethons as people fork over money out of pity, the tragic stories milked until they're dry. It happens in nursing homes where severely disabled people are often forced to live against their wills. It happens on street corners and at bus stops, on playgrounds and in restaurants. It happens when nondisabled people stare, trying to be covert, smacking their children to teach them how to pretend not to stare. A character in the play *P.H. \*reaks: The Hidden History of People with Disabilities* juxtaposes the voyeurism of the freak show with the voyeurism of everyday life, saying:

We're always on display. You think if I walked down the street of your stinking little nowhere town people wouldn't stare at me? Damn right they would, and tell their neighbors and friends and talk about me over dinners and picnics and PTA meetings. Well, if they want to do that, they're going to have to pay me for that privilege. You want to stare at me, fine, it's 25 cents, cash on the barrel. You want a picture, that's another quarter. My life story. Pay me. You think I'm being exploited? You pay to go to a baseball game, don't you?<sup>25</sup>

Today's freakdom happens all the time, and we're not even paid for it. In fact disabled people have, as a group, an astounding unemployment rate of 71 percent.<sup>26</sup> When we do work\* we make 64 cents

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\* In 1999 I incorrectly cited the unemployment rate for disabled people. I assumed that the *unemployment* rate equaled the *employment* rate subtracted from 100 percent. However the two rates are calculated in entirely different ways. The *employment* rate for disabled people factors in all non-institutionalized disabled people between the ages of 18 and 64; whereas, the *unemployment* rate factors in only the disabled people who are actively in the labor force. In 2002, the employment rate for disabled people was 21 percent; the corresponding number for nondisabled people was

to a nondisabled worker's dollar.<sup>27</sup>

We don't control today's freakdom, unlike the earlier freak show freakdom, which sometimes we did. The presentation of disability today has been shaped entirely by the medical establishment and the charity industry. That is, until the disability rights movement came along. This civil rights and liberation movement established Centers for Independent Living all over the country, working to redefine the concept of independence. These centers offer support and advocacy, helping folks find accessible housing and personal attendants, funding for adaptive equipment and job training. Independent living advocates measure independence not by how many tasks one can do without assistance, but by how much control a disabled person has over his/her life and by the quality of that life.

The movement founded direct-action, rabble-rousing groups, like ADAPT<sup>28</sup> and Not Dead Yet,<sup>29</sup> that disrupt nursing home industry conventions, blockade non-accessible public transportation, occupy the offices of politicians committed to the status quo, and protest outside courtrooms. Disabled people have a history of direct-action protest, beginning with the League of the Physically Handicapped's WPA protest. In 1977, disabled people occupied the HEW (Department of Health, Education, and Welfare) offices in San Francisco for 25 days, successfully pressuring politicians into signing Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, the first civil rights legislation in the United States for disabled people.<sup>30</sup> And today, ADAPT is rabble-rousing hard, both on the streets and in Congress, to pass legislation that would make it more possible for people with significant disabilities to live in homes of their own

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78 percent. In the same year, the unemployment rate for disabled people was 14 percent, while for nondisabled people, it was 6 percent. Underlying these numbers is the reality that a far greater percentage of the total nondisabled population is in the labor force (83 percent) than of the disabled population (24 percent). For more information, see [www.ilr.cornell.edu/edi/DisabilityStatistics/issues.cfm](http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/edi/DisabilityStatistics/issues.cfm) (accessed May 20, 2009).—E.C., 2009

choosing, rather than nursing homes.

The movement is creating a strong, politicized disability culture with a growing body of literature, performances, humor, theory, and political savvy. We have theater, dance, poetry, anthologies, fiction, magazines, art exhibits, film festivals, analysis and criticism written by disabled folks, conferences, and a fledgling academic discipline called disability studies. At the same time, there are disabled people working to crossover into mainstream culture, working to become models photographed for the big-name fashion magazines, actors in soap operas, sitcoms, and Hollywood movies, recognized artists, writers, and journalists.

The movement lobbied hard for laws to end separate and unequal education, for comprehensive civil rights legislation. The 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) did not spring from George H. W. Bush's head, fully formed and shaped by his goodwill and understanding of disability issues. Rather lawyers schooled in disability rights and disabled White House appointees with a stake in disability politics crafted the bill, disability lobbyists educated and lobbied hard, and grassroots disability activists mobilized to get the ADA passed. In short the disability rights movement, founded in the same storm of social change as women's liberation and gay/lesbian liberation, riding on the energy and framework created by the Black civil rights movement, came along and is undoing internalized oppression, making community, creating a culture and sense of identity, and organizing to change the status quo.

These forces are taking freakdom back, declaring that disabled people will be at the center of defining disability, defining our lives, defining who we are and who we want to be. We are declaring that doctors and their pathology, rubes and their money, anthropologists and their theories, gawkers and their so-called innocuous intentions, bullies and their violence, showmen and their hype, Jerry Lewis and his telethon, government bureaucrats and their rules will no longer define us. To arrive as a self-defined people, disabled people, like other marginalized people, need a strong sense of identity. We need to know our history, come to understand

which pieces of that history we want to make our own, and develop a self-image full of pride. The women and men who worked the freak show, the freaks who knew how to flaunt their disabilities—the tall man who wore a top hat to add a few inches to his height, the fat woman who refused to diet, the bearded woman who not only refused to shave, but grew her beard longer and longer, the cognitively disabled person who said, “I know you think I look like an ape. Here let me accentuate that look”—can certainly teach us a thing or two about identity and pride.

Pride is not an inessential thing. Without pride, disabled people are much more likely to accept unquestioningly the daily material conditions of ableism: unemployment, poverty, segregated and substandard education, years spent locked up in nursing homes, violence perpetrated by caregivers, lack of access. Without pride, individual and collective resistance to oppression becomes nearly impossible. But disability pride is no easy thing to come by. Disability has been soaked in shame, dressed in silence, rooted in isolation.

In 1969 in the backwoods of Oregon, I entered the “regular” first grade after a long struggle with the school officials who wanted me in “special education,” a battle won only because I had scored well on an IQ test, my father knew the principal, and the first grade teacher, who lived upriver from us, liked my family and advocated for me. I became the first disabled kid to be mainstreamed in the district. Eight years later, the first laws requiring public education for disabled kids, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and Section 504, were signed. By the mid-1980s, mainstreaming wasn’t a rare occurrence, even in small, rural schools, but in 1969 I was a first.

No one—neither my family nor my teachers—knew how to acknowledge and meet my particular disability-related needs while letting me live a rather ordinary, rough-and-tumble childhood. They simply had no experience with a smart, gimp six-year-old who learned to read quickly but had a hard time with the physical act of writing, who knew all the answers but whose speech was hard to understand. In an effort to resolve this tension, everyone ignored my

disability and disability-related needs as much as possible. When I had trouble handling a glass of water, tying my shoes, picking up coins, screws, paper clips, writing my name on the blackboard, no one asked if I needed help. When I couldn't finish an assignment in the allotted time, teachers insisted I turn it in unfinished. When my classmates taunted me with *retard*, *monkey*, *defect*, no one comforted me. I rapidly became the class outcast, and the adults left me to fend for myself. I took as much distance as I could from the kids in "special ed." I was determined not to be one of them. I wanted to be "normal," to pass as nondisabled, even though my shaky hands and slurred speech were impossible to ignore.

Certainly I wasn't the only disabled person I knew. In Port Orford, many of the men had work-related disabilities: missing fingers, arms, and legs, broken backs, serious nerve damage. A good friend of my parents had diabetes. A neighbor girl, seven or eight years younger than me, had CP much like mine. My best friend's brother had a significant cognitive disability. And yet I knew no one with a disability, none of us willing to talk, each of us hiding as best we could.

No single person underlines this ironic isolation better than Mary Walls, who joined my class in the fourth grade. She wore hearing aids in both ears and split her days between the "regular" and the "special ed" classrooms. We shared a speech therapist. I wish we had grown to be friends, but rather we became enemies, Mary calling me names and me chasing her down. I understand now that Mary lived by trying to read lips, and my lips, because of the way CP affects my speech, are nearly impossible to read. She probably taunted me out of frustration, and I chased her down, as I did none of my other bullies, because I could. I understand now about horizontal hostility: gay men and lesbians disliking bisexual people, transsexual women looking down on drag queens, working-class people fighting with poor people. Marginalized people from many communities create their own internal tensions and hostilities, and disabled people are no exception. I didn't have a disabled friend until I was in my mid-20s, and still today most of my close

friends, the people I call “chosen family,” are nondisabled. Often I feel like an impostor as I write about disability, feel that I’m not disabled enough, not grounded deeply enough in disability community, to put these words on paper. *This* is the legacy for me of shame, silence, and isolation.

Pride works in direct opposition to internalized oppression. The latter provides fertile ground for shame, denial, self-hatred, and fear. The former encourages anger, strength, and joy. To transform self-hatred into pride is a fundamental act of resistance. In many communities, language becomes one of the arenas for this transformation. Sometimes the words of hatred and violence can be neutralized or even turned into the words of pride. To stare down the bully calling *cripple*, the basher swinging the word *queer* like a baseball bat, to say “Yeah, you’re right. I’m queer, I’m a crip. So what?” undercuts the power of those who want us dead.

Many social change movements have used language and naming specifically to create pride and power. In African American communities, the progression from *Colored* to *Negro* to *Black* both followed and helped give rise to the pride and anger that fueled the civil rights movement. “Black Is Beautiful” became a powerful rallying cry for Black community and culture. But while the word *Black* so clearly connects itself to pride, the use of the word *nigger* among Black people causes much debate. For some, claiming that word with affection and humor rejects a certain kind of pain and humiliation, but for others, it simply reinforces those same feelings. The ugly words—*faggot*, *queer*, *nigger*, *retard*, *cripple*, *freak*—come highly charged with emotional and social history. Which of us can use these words to name our pride? The answer is not logical.

Let me refute even the slightest suggestion that LGBT people who hate the word *queer*, disabled people who hate the words *cripple* and *freak*, Black people who hate the word *nigger* are trapped by their internalized oppression. That would be far too simple and neat. Instead I want to follow a messier course, to examine the ways in which the ugly words we sometimes use to name our pride tap into a complex knot of personal and collective histories.

I want to return to my original question: why does the word *freak* unsettle me?

But even as I veer away from the simple and neat argument, the one centered upon the ways oppression can turn around and thrive in the bodies/minds of oppressed people, I must pull my self-hatred out of the bag. Even though the answer to my question about the word *freak* is bigger than self-hatred, I need to stare down the self who wants to be “normal,” the kid who thought she could and should pass as nondisabled, the crip still embarrassed by the way her body moves. I can feel slivers of shame, silence, and isolation still imbedded deep in my body. I hate these fragments. In the last decade I’ve stretched into the joy of being a gimp among gimps, learning anger and subversion, coming to recognize the grace in a gnarly hand, tremor, rolling limp, raspy breath, finding comfort and camaraderie with disabled people. Yet I have not stretched far enough to imagine flaunting my CP, even though flaunting is a tool many disability activists use. They are in effect saying to nondisabled people, “Damn right, you better look. Look long and hard. Watch my crooked hobble, my twitching body, my withered legs. Listen to my hands sign a language you don’t even know. Notice my milky eyes I no longer hide behind sunglasses. Look at me straight on, because for all your years of gawking, you’ve still not seen me.” Is flaunting the same as pride? I don’t know. But I do know that every time I hear disabled people call themselves freaks, my decades-old self-hatred collides head-on with my relatively newfound pride.

For me *freak* is defined by my personal experience of today’s freakdom. Today’s freakdom happened to me at Fairview State Hospital in 1965 when the doctors first declared me “retarded.” I didn’t yet talk and was given an IQ test that relied not on verbal skills, but on fine motor coordination. And I—being a spastic little kid with CP—failed the test miserably. I simply couldn’t manipulate their blocks, draw their pictures, or put their puzzles together. Today’s freakdom happened every time I was taunted *retard*, *monkey*, *weirdo*. It happens every time someone gawks, an occurrence

that happens so regularly I rarely even notice. I don't see people—curious, puzzled, anxious—turn their heads to watch my trembling hands, my jerky movements. I don't see people strain to understand me, then decide it's impossible. Long ago I learned to block all those visual intrusions. I only know it happens because my friends notice and tell me. Yet I know I store the gawking in my bones. Today's freakdom happens every time some well-meaning stranger or acquaintance suggests a certain combination of vitamins, crystals, or New Age visualization techniques that she knows will cure my CP. I always want to retort, "Yeah right, like I'm looking for a cure, like my brain cells that died some time before birth will magically regenerate," but the moment inevitably passes before I can even think of the words. This is my personal history of freakdom.

In addition, *freak* is shadowed for me by the complicated collective history of exploitation and subversion at the freak show. I relish the knowledge that there have been people who have taken advantage of white people's and nondisabled people's urge to gawk. I love that disabled people at one time were paid to flaunt, perform, and exaggerate their disabilities. At the same time I hate how the freak show reinforced the damaging lies about disabled people and nondisabled people of color. I despise the racism, ableism, capitalism, and imperialism that had showmen buying and kidnapping people into the freak show. I rage at how few choices disabled people had.

To infuse the word *freak* with pride, I would need to step through my personal history of freakdom into the larger collective history of the freak show. Stepping through the last slivers of my self-hatred, through the pain I've paired with gawking and the word *retard*, I could use Charles Stratton's strut, Ann Thompson's turning of the ordinary into the extraordinary, to strengthen my own resistance. I could name myself a freak alongside Daisy Hilton, William Johnson, and Otis Jordan. I want it to work.

Instead the two histories collide in a madcap wheelchair race. My personal history isn't so easy to step through; the slivers tear my skin; the old familiar pain leaves me guarded and cautious. And the collective history is hard to reduce to a pure story of resistance



and subversion that I want to celebrate and use. I keep thinking of the people who worked as “Ubangi Savages.” Sure, Charles Stratton and Violet Hilton became showmen and -women; they took one set of exploitative conditions they were born into and another set of exploitative conditions associated with their work and subverted them as far as possible. But those African men and women, they were casualties of imperialism and racism; their resistance, reflected in the sheer act of surviving the Ringling Brothers Circus, is not a resistance to celebrate, but one to honor and mourn.

This collision of histories leads me to think about the act of witnessing. Are there kinds of freakdom—public stripping, the unabashed staring on street corners, the exhibition of nondisabled people of color kidnapped to the United States, the display of cognitively disabled people as non-human—that we need to bear witness to rather than incorporate into our pride? How does witness differ from pride? What do they share in common?

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To unravel the relationship of the word *freak* to pride and witness, let me step back for a moment, move to the word *queer*, to the LGBT community. I think it no accident that I’ve paired the words *queer* and *freak* in this examination of language, pride, and resistance. The ways in which queer people and disabled people experience oppression follow, to a certain extent, parallel paths. Queer identity has been pathologized and medicalized. Until 1973, homosexuality was considered a psychiatric disorder. Today transsexuality and transgenderism, under the names of gender dysphoria and gender identity disorder, are classified as psychiatric conditions. Queerness is all too frequently intertwined with shame, silence, and isolation. Queer people, particularly LGBT youth, often live cut off from other queer folk, alone in our schools, neighborhoods, and families of origin. Queer people deal with gawking all the time: when we hold hands in public, defy gender boundaries and norms, insist on recognition for our relationships and families.

Intersex people, trans people, and people who don't conform to gender norms—such as bearded women who grow their beards—have their own history at the freak show. Queer people have been told for centuries by church, state, and science that our bodies are abnormal. These parallel paths don't mean that queer folk and disabled folk experience the same oppression; at many points the paths diverge. For example the gawkers often pity crips and beat up queers (although some crips do get beat up, and some queers, pitied). But the places of similarity, the fact that both peoples have been considered freaks of nature, push at the question of pride. How have LGBT people created pride? What are the words and the symbols of that pride?

*Queer* has accomplished a number of things for the LGBT individuals and communities who have embraced it. The word names a reality. Yes, we are different; we are outsiders; we do not fit the dominant culture's definition of normal. *Queer* celebrates that difference rather than hiding or denying it. By making *queer* our own, it becomes less a bludgeon. We take a weapon away from the homophobes. *Queer* names a hugely diverse group of people. It brings lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and trans people in all our variation and difference and overlap under one roof; it is a coalition-building word. For some people the word works; for others it doesn't. The same things can be said of the word *crip* in relationship to the disability community. All of this seems simple enough and is typically as far as the thinking about naming goes.

But I want to push the thinking further. How do people who have lived in shame and isolation create community and pride? How do we even find each other? Let me turn here from the realm of words to the realm of symbol. Since the mid-70s LGBT people have used the pink triangle as a symbol to identify ourselves to each other and to the world. The Nazis originally used this symbol during the Holocaust to mark non-Jewish gay men on the streets and in the concentration camps just as the yellow star was used to mark Jews. (Jewish gay men were likely to be marked with both, forced to wear the yellow star overlaid by the pink triangle.)

The pink triangle functions now as a symbol of identity, witness, and pride in queer communities. As a sign of identity, it communicates both covertly and overtly. That pink triangle graphic worn on a button or stuck on a bumper may not have much meaning to many straight people—particularly those not connected to or aware of queer culture—but among LGBT people, especially in urban centers, it readily signals queer identity to other queer people. In this fashion, the pink triangle functions as an insider's language, a language attempting to include a marginalized people while excluding the oppressor. It is also used more overtly to speak of identity, sometimes incorporated into educational work about the historical oppression of gay people, other times into activist work. As a symbol of witness, it remembers and memorializes the gay men who died in the Holocaust. It keeps the memory of Nazi atrocities alive in our consciousness. It serves as a reminder of the extremity of queer oppression. And as a symbol of pride, the pink triangle neutralizes and transforms hatred, following a similar political path as the words *queer* and *cripple*. It is worn by out and proud queer people. These functions—marking identity, expressing pride, insisting upon witness—go hand in hand, all three important for any marginalized community. In our search for liberation, we can sometimes turn the language and symbols most closely reflecting our oppression into powerful expressions of pride. And yet that equation sometimes betrays history, blurring the difference between witness and pride.

As a symbol of pride, the pink triangle has frequently been divorced from its history. In one ahistorical explanation of this symbol, the owner of a Minneapolis gay bookstore tells his customers that pink triangles represent white gay men/lesbians and black triangles—used by the Nazis to mark people deemed anti-social, including, it is assumed, lesbians, as well as sex workers, cognitively disabled people, and homeless people, during the Holocaust—represent black gay men/lesbians. Divorced from its history, the pink triangle becomes a consumerist symbol, used to sell T-shirts and keychains; it becomes a lie. It is not and never will be the rain-

bow flag, which Gilbert Baker designed in 1978 specifically as a queer symbol full of unabashed pride and affirmation. To use the rainbow flag is to connect oneself to queer identity and pride as they are currently constructed. To use the pink triangle honestly is to connect oneself to history.

I listen again to my Jewish dyke friends who don't understand the pink triangle as a symbol of pride. They ask me, "Why reclaim this symbol that has meant genocide? My family would never wear yellow stars joyfully as symbols of their pride, perhaps in witness and rage, but never in pride. Why then the pink triangle? How can it possibly be a symbol of pride?" Behind their words, I see the shadows of a collective history, the living reminders of numbers tattooed on forearms, the stories passed down of family and culture destroyed.

Their questions and disbelief ask me to unwind the act of witness from the expression of pride. Both witness and pride strengthen identity, foster resistance, cultivate subversion. People who have lived in shame and isolation need all the pride we can muster, not to mire ourselves in a narrowly defined identity politics, but to sustain broad-based rebellion. And likewise, we need a witness to all our histories, both collective and personal. Yet we also need to remember that witness and pride are not the same. Witness pairs grief and rage with remembrance. Pride pairs joy with a determination to be visible. Witness demands primary adherence to and respect for history. Pride uses history as one of its many tools. Sometimes witness and pride work in concert, other times not. We cannot afford to confuse, merge, blur the two.

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And now I can come back to *freak*. The disabled people who use the word *freak*, are they, like many queer people, betraying witness in their creation of pride? A disabled person who names herself proudly a freak draws on the history of freakdom and the freak show to strengthen her sense of resistance, to name a truth, to

bolster her identity. But in using history this way, is she remembering only Ann Thompson, Violet Hilton, and the cognitively disabled girl who, while on display, took to swearing at the rubes? What about “Maximo” and “Bartola”? What about the nondisabled people of color who died at the freak show, desolate for their homelands? When we name ourselves freaks, are we forgetting the part of history that calls for witness, not pride? Are we blurring the two?

How does the history of the freak show interact with the history of today’s freakdom? How do our personal histories enter our collective history? If I had not internalized nondisabled people’s gawking to the point that I no longer notice it, if instead I felt pissy and uppity about it, would I be more able to imagine flaunting my CP? Would I be more willing to take the resistance of the people who worked as freaks as my own? Would I gladly use the word to acknowledge a simple truth: that the world considers me a freak?

What about people disabled as adults, people who make it relatively smoothly through the first rounds of denial, grief, and rehab and maybe find the disability rights movement and disability community? They don’t have a long personal history of freakdom. Hopefully shame, silence, and isolation haven’t been buried deeply in their bodies. What might their relationship to the history of the freak show, to the word *freak*, be? Do they ache toward assimilation, not wanting to approach freakdom? Or does freakdom make immediate sense? I don’t know, but their relationships to *freak* probably differ from mine. What about cognitively disabled people? What does *freak* mean to them? Where is the pride in a legacy of being owned by showmen who exhibited you as non-human? Again their relationships to freak show history are bound to differ from mine.

I think of the disabled people I know who call themselves freaks. Many of them are performers, helping to build disability culture and/or working to break into mainstream culture. In using the name *freak*, they claim freak show history both as disabled people and as showmen and -women. They shape pride out of a

centuries-old legacy of performing on the street corner, at the open-air fair, in the palace and at the carnival as freak, monster, pet dwarf, court jester, clown. On the other hand, could a disabled person whose personal history included public stripping but not performing as easily break through today's freakdom into that earlier freakdom? The history that for so long has placed us on stage, in front of audiences, sometimes in subversion and resistance, other times in loathing and shame, asks not only for pride, but also for witness as our many different personal histories come tangling into our collective one.

This same profusion of histories exists in other communities. For instance, even though I, along with many others, have made *queer* mine, the word holds intolerable grief and bitterness for a large number of gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, and trans people. The effeminate boy who came out in the '50s. The dykes and queens caught in the pre-Stonewall police raids. The trans people with histories that include psychiatric abuse. The folks who can pass as straight and/or normatively gendered and choose to do so, who yearn toward true assimilation, an end to difference. I can't presume to know what relationships each of these people have with the word *queer*. How do their personal histories come crashing into the current, collectively defined use of *queer*? The ugly words follow no logic, sometimes calling out pride, sometimes witness, sometimes both, sometimes neither.

What will feed our pride, that joyful, determined insistence to be recognized both inside and outside ourselves? And what demands witness our grief-filled, rage-filled remembrance? Which pieces of history, which kinds of humor, which words? Let me return once more to my question, "Why *queer* and *cripple* but not *freak*?" This time I won't expect an answer. Instead, I want to take the image of Barney and Hiram Davis's mild and direct gaze into the freak show camera and practice that stare when nondisabled people and straight people gawk at me. I want to place Robert Waldow's resistance and Mercy Bump's outrage alongside my lived knowledge that freakdom continues today. I want to remember

that whether I call myself *freak* or not, I share much with Ann Thompson and William Johnson, Otis Jordan and Daisy Hilton. I want to refigure the world, insisting that anthropologists never again construct lies like the ones they built around the bodies of “Maximo” and “Bartola,” that doctors never again publicly strip disabled children. I want to sharpen my pride on what strengthens me, my witness on what haunts me. Whatever we name ourselves, however we end up shattering our self-hatred, shame, silence, and isolation, the goal is the same: to end our daily material oppression.