

# Freacking Fatness through History: Critical Intersections of Fatness and Disability

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Dr. [Colleen] Rand asked 47 formerly fat men and women whether they would rather be obese again or have some other disability. Every one of the 47 people said they would rather be deaf or have dyslexia, diabetes, bad acne or heart disease than be obese again. Ninety-one percent said they would rather have a leg amputated. Eighty-nine percent would rather be blind. One patient said: “When you’re blind, people want to help you. No one wants to help you when you’re fat.” —“The Burdens of Being Overweight: Mistreatment and Misconceptions,” *New York Times*, 1992.

Fat acceptance bloggers contend that the war on obesity has given people an excuse to wage war on fat people and that health concerns — coupled with the belief that fat people have only themselves to blame for being fat — are being used to justify discrimination that would not be tolerated toward just about any other group of people. “I’m not surprised there are so many of these blogs now,” Ms. [Rachel] Richardson said. “Anti-obesity hysteria has reached a boiling point. Blogging is a way for people to fight back.”

—“In the Fatosphere, Big is In, or at Least Accepted,” *New York Times*, 2008.

Introduction

In both popular culture and the mainstream media, the fat body (“fat” as political identity category is explored later in this paper) is actively a target of derision and social control. Fat people who refuse and/or are unable to solve this so called “problem” of their own fatness face sometimes extreme stigma and even social humiliation (Prohaska and Gailey, 2009). While it is common to couch the poor treatment of fat people in terms of concerns about their health, according to fat studies scholar, Amy Farrell in *Fat Shame*, “Every diet that has emerged on the scene has come with a larger social agenda and cultural meaning . . . fat is a social as well as physical problem; . . . the social stigma of fatness—and the fantasy of freeing oneself

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from this stigma – coincides with or even takes priority over issues of health” (Farrell, 2011, p. 4). Farrell is articulating the degree to which fatness as an unsavory personal quality outweighs health concerns about restrictive dieting, particularly for young girls and women. Farrell argues that fat bodies have such a well developed stigma of being so wholly unworthy that marginalizing behavior no longer need be rooted in pathologized “concern” for the health of fat people. Similarly, feminist philosopher, Susan Bordo (2003) categorizes our culture’s obsession with weight as a body project: “any softness or bulge comes to be seen as unsightly – as disgusting, disorderly, ‘fat,’ which must be ‘eliminated’ or ‘busted,’ as popular exercise-equipment ads put it” (p. 57). Bordo makes links between narratives of obesity and anorexia arguing that “both [are] rooted in the same consumer-culture construction of desire as overwhelming and overtaking the self” (p. 201). The attitude that fatness is inherently “unhealthy” and undesirable is a twenty-first century view.

Contrary to twenty-first century attitudes towards fatness, the nineteenth century is a critical era of writing meaning onto the fat figure. Throughout the century, fatness functioned as metaphor for a number of different attributes, both positive and negative, but also those seen as value neutral. Extreme fatness was also a bodily curiosity. Like hundreds of other different freak show archetypes, the fat woman quickly rose to prominence in national freak shows as a curious body, a sight to behold. Although many narratives about fatness existed outside of the freak show, the freak show functions as a space where more positive views and perceptions of fatness were possible. Rather than just a genealogy of fatness, the focus of this paper is on the cultural perception of the freakish fat body. Freak show platforms have radically changed since the nineteenth century. No longer touring in a circus side show, twenty-first century fat bodies are readily displayed on reality television series featuring dramatic stories of weight loss and body projects of transformation and reform. The startling number of television shows about fat people dedicated to weight loss and transformation is significant. If fat people are consistently the “before” body in relation to the excitement and praise of the “after” body, that hardly offers an ambiguous interpretation of the value of fatness. Fatness is continually re-established as “other.” Viewing fatness as freakish enables a specific lens of analysis. Studies of freakdom and freakish bodies are often disability studies scholarly projects, yet the fat lady remains unclaimed by either disability studies scholars or fat studies scholars.

This project seeks to explore the connections that are possible between the fields of fat studies and disability studies. Fat studies problematizes the common

cultural reading of the fat body as a “bad” and medicalized body. Notions of “bad” and pathologized bodies are also explored in disability studies scholarship. However, few scholars are exploring what possibilities lie in the intersection of these two fields of inquiry. In this paper, I will focus on both the historical and modern freak show as platforms for the display of the fat figure. In the first chapter I discuss how historical freak shows provide insight into the construction of the fat figure and the meaning of fatness throughout the nineteenth century. In the second chapter, I shift the lens of analysis from fat women in the historical freak show to portrayals of fatness in the twenty-first century in the reality television show, *The Biggest Loser*. These two freak show platforms highlight the changing meaning of the fat figure and challenge dominant assumptions about the fat body, proposing instead that the fat figure viewed as a disabled body enables subversive discourse and solidarity.

The freak show, beginning in England in the sixteenth century at “madhouses,” spread quickly throughout Europe and to the United States (Dennet, 1997). The height of the freak show, the nineteenth century, is one of the earliest American cultural moments that effectively links fatness and disability. Prior to the medical model and understanding of disability, Americans with disabilities and visible, bodily forms of difference were labeled as freaks. Fat ladies were extremely prevalent figures at freak shows. Thus, fatness, disability, and freakishness are linked through the freak show; they cannot be fully untangled from each other without losing a great deal of complexity. This particular moment of the freak show has been studied by disability studies scholars. That disability studies scholars have already built scholarship on the freak show is at this point a critical part of my argument about why disability studies needs to investigate fat studies. To date, nearly all scholarship from disability studies on the freak show gives little more than a passing nod to the presence of the fat lady. It is because disability studies has implicitly left out scholarship about the fat people at the freak show that I am interested in using the freak show to make this larger argument about the inclusion of fat studies within the framework of disability studies.

Because this paper is ultimately a project seeking to connect the fields of fat studies and disability studies, there is a broad invitation for more scholars to acknowledge these connections in order to grow both fields. Disability studies has focused on creating a community around difference; most disability studies activists reject the notion of assimilation into mainstream culture primarily because mainstream culture has marked the disabled body as one which is impossible to accommodate. By comparison, a fat person might well face fewer institutional barriers

than someone with an intellectual disability, for example. The dominant narrative about fat people is that they are lazy where the dominant narrative about people with disabilities often suggests that they are inherently incapable.

Although disability studies has valuable models of understanding and social activism for fat studies to adopt, that is not to say that fat studies should be absorbed into disability studies. However, the possibilities explored by linking fatness and disability are valuable opportunities for beginning to understand stigmatized difference. For example, the possibility of getting better rights and justice for fat people by categorizing fat as a disability should not be dismissed. There are both disability and fat studies scholars who would resist this work, but I hope that by exploring one of the earliest cultural intersections of fat and disability —the freak show —and showing how the historical display of the fat figure has so drastically changed in the twenty-first century that the gains of linking the fields will be better understood. A small number of fat and disability studies scholars have begun the process of linking fatness and disability, but the overlaps between the fields suggest that much more intersectional analysis remains.

For a feminist disability studies scholar, the social construction of fatness is akin to the social construction of disability. Simi Linton (1998), disability studies scholar and activist, neatly troubles the cultural understanding of disability as illness by critiquing the medicalization of disability and asserting the social construction of disability:

The medicalization of disability casts human variation as deviance from the norm, as pathological condition, as deficit, and significantly, as an individual burden and personal tragedy. Society, in agreeing to assign medical meaning to *disability*, colludes to keep the issue within the purview of the medical establishment, to keep it a personal matter and ‘treat’ the condition and the person with the condition rather than ‘treating’ the social processes and policies that constricted disabled people’s lives. The disability studies’ and disability rights movement’s position is critical of the domination of the medical definition and views it as a major stumbling block to the reinterpretation of *disability* as a political category and to the social changes that could follow such a shift. (*Claiming disability: knowledge and identity*, p. 11)

Here, disability is identified as a political identity category strategically creating community and providing an alternative to the medical model of disability—where disability is strictly defined and understood through a framework of something

“wrong” with the body. Instead, disability can be seen as a celebrated path of difference mediated by the individual and the community rather than a medical professional. When that understanding of disability is applied to fatness, a similar progression of understanding is possible.

Medical professionals currently categorize the body according to the Body Mass Index (BMI). The BMI uses the two characteristics of height and weight to classify bodies as underweight, normal weight, overweight, and obese. Like disability, weights that fall outside of the normal weight range are seen as indicators of something “wrong” with the body. Rejecting the categorizations of overweight and obese as medical terminology used to pathologized bodies, some people of size have worked to reclaim the word “fat.” Rather than see the word fat as a stigmatizing insult, fat activists and other self-identified fat people see the term fat as a bodily characteristic much like hair color or height—a characteristic without intrinsic value. This kind of work to destabilize the meaning(s) of fatness, as evidenced in the epigraphs, is a critical component of fat activist work. Fatness becomes a characteristic that builds community around identity and shared experiences of stigma, marginalization, and often the joy of living in a visibly different body. Fat studies scholar Esther Rothblum (2011) asserts that:

Fat studies is a field of scholarship that critically examines societal attitudes about body weight and appearance and that advocates equality for all people with respect to body size. Fat studies seeks to remove the negative associations that society has about fat and the fat body. It regards weight, like height, as a human characteristic that varies widely across any population . . . Fat studies scholars ask why we oppress people who are fat and who benefits from that oppression. In that regard, fat studies is similar to academic disciplines that focus on race, ethnicity, gender or age. (“Fat Studies,” p. 173)

This definition of the field of fat studies doesn’t explicitly make a connection to disability, but within this framework there is a lot of opportunity to explore the intersections of these fields. Like disability studies, fat studies is also a field that has not yet become very well or widely institutionalized. There is a substantial amount of theoretical work still left open for new voices and scholars. Both fields of study have strong activist roots seeking direct action and justice in order to shape a better world. Both fat and disability activists have strong community and online presences and are gaining increasing ground with institutional recognition.

Scholarly study of the dramatic shift in the cultural purview of the very

fat body as one inspiring awe in the nineteenth century to one garnering disgust is significant and critical work. The fat figure asks us to explore difference and stigma as well as notions of burden, blame, and goodness. Increased cultural attention to the social construction of “good” and “bad” bodies makes possible a significantly better world focused on full humanity rather than aesthetic bias and principles of utility. Understanding fatness as disability enables fat studies and disability scholars to continue to envision a better world, a space of belonging.

### I: Fat Ladies at the Freak Show

“They awe the public with their immensity.”

—“Secrets of the Showmen” *New York Times*, October 8, 1882

“Certainly adipose tissue is a thing to be proud of.”

—“With the Circus” *New York Times*, August 10, 1901

During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, circuses and dime store museums employed a variety of people who were seen as different — abnormal — to be displayed as freaks. As families walked by the freak show tent, a showman shouted out the attributes of the freaks inside. One of the most common freak show performers, the fat lady, might have stood there with him to draw the public inside the tent as the showman shouted, “She’s so big and so fat it takes four men to hug her and a boxcar to lug her” (Nickell, 2008, p. 96). Crowds drawn into the tent were given explicit permission to view different bodies — to gawk freely in awe and wonder, and leave feeling more than reassured of their own normality. After viewing the various performances, audiences were ushered out, and a new crowd of thrill seekers ushered in for the freaks to entertain all over again.

The freak show as a site of scholarly study offers the opportunity to explore the meaning of difference. Freak show performers were often people with physical disabilities. Thus, the freak show allows scholars to further understand the role of disability in American culture and explore a world where freaks embraced their different bodies for profit. Instead of languishing in an institution hidden away from the public, these freak show performers invited the gaze of the public. Disability studies scholar Rosemarie Garland Thomson (1996) asserts that, “Constructed as the embodiment of corporeal insufficiency and deviance, the physically disabled body becomes a repository for social anxieties about such troubling concerns as vulnerability, control, and identity” (6). The spectacle of the freak show then also allowed Victorian audiences to reassure themselves of their own normality.

The focus of this chapter is the fat lady at the freak show. The nineteenth and

early twentieth centuries in the United States were a period of time spent defining the meaning of the fat body. During this time, conflicting cultural narratives about fatness circulated, and examination of the fat ladies at the freak show reveals how these narratives were written on the fat lady's body. Tracing the changing nature of the fat lady up through the early twentieth century also allows us to see how fatness functions as a disability, as a body that violated basic constructions of what bodies should be. The figure of the fat lady tells a narrative about disability as well as fatness because she made a living in a site where the defining characteristic of becoming a freak was most often physical disability and difference.

The figure of the fat lady at the freak shows of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries makes possible a historical connection linking fat studies and disability studies. This project will examine the connections between fat and disability through a feminist interpretive framework. Freak show scholarship has been pursued by many disability studies scholars<sup>1</sup>, yet does not include the fat lady. According to disability studies scholarship, the freak show is an exhibit of "Cultural ritual that dramatized the era's physical and social hierarchy by spotlighting bodily stigmata that could be choreographed as an absolute contrast to 'normal' American embodiment and authenticated as corporeal truth" (Garland-Thomson, 1996, p. 63). Despite the view of the freak show as a cultural space to understand/view diverse bodies, disability studies scholarship about the freak show rarely even mentions the fat lady other than to verify that she was there. The missing figure of the fat lady represents a loss of complexity for freak show theory, as well as a missed opportunity to explore fascinating paradoxes and competing narratives about fatness.

The omission of scholarship about the fat lady is significant. Disability studies doesn't interrogate the fat lady's role in the freak show from a position of disability. Fat studies scholars have also neglected to examine the role of the fat lady at the freak show. Although the fat lady's presence is recorded in some histories of fatness and the nineteenth century, fat studies has by and large not acknowledged this central connection to the field of disability studies through freak show scholarship. In order to trace the genealogy of fatness throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the United States, a close examination of the role of disability in cultural productions of the fat body is crucial. Developing and examining these critical links between fat studies and disability studies through the figure of the fat lady challenges both fields of inquiry about marginalized bodies, social inequalities, and the social construction of good and bad bodies.

The discriminatory attitudes towards fatness in the twenty-first century make

it difficult to imagine that just over one hundred years ago, Americans valued the plump body as a model of health, vitality, and success financially and personally for both men and women (Stearns, 2002). Fat studies scholar Peter Stearns (2002) records attitudes towards fatness in the nineteenth century, “Between the 1860s and the 1880s, rotundity gained ground for men as well as women . . . Doctors urged the importance of solid weight in their growing campaign against nervousness” (9). Adipose tissue then, as one epigraph references, was in fact “a thing to be proud of” for fashionable and healthy nineteenth century individuals. In addition to the positive aspects of fatness, freakery also conveyed a different cultural meaning in the nineteenth century. Freak shows were not inherently spaces inciting disgust. Putting difference on display in the nineteenth century merely indicated a body that looked interesting and different; “Freaks were public displays of novelty that drew viewers who gladly paid to stare. A freak merited staring because it bore evidence of ‘nature’s sport,’ God’s infinite capacity for mysterious surprise, or simply inspired delight” (Garland-Thomson, 2009, p. 164). The prevalence of fat ladies in freak shows indicates that their Victorian viewers enjoyed gazing at the fat body, a body whose “immensity,” according to the *New York Times*, inspired “awe and wonder.”

What is critical to note about fatness during the nineteenth century is the degree to which the meaning of fatness was constantly in a state of flux, often not just according to decade but also from person to person. Medical practitioners disputed each other’s prescriptions about weight with some asserting the need for weight to keep patients healthy and others advocating weight loss to manage illness. Fatness was in one moment a symbol of success and in another moment a metaphor for materialism and greed. Fat women were erotically appealing in one image and laughable in the next. The narratives about fatness emerging in the nineteenth and through the twentieth century are deeply conflicting, and that struggle to understand and categorize the meaning of the fat body is fascinating. While the master narrative that eventually emerged was one that denigrates the fat body, this narrative could conceivably have been one of the other more positive cultural narratives. The instability of the narratives about fatness demonstrates the social constructions of fatness, health, and the body as a repository for cultural anxiety.

### **Freak Shows**

Freak shows date back to the Renaissance in England, but were not incredibly popular until the nineteenth century when the rise of Victorian leisure culture led to widespread profitability (Durbach, 2010; Bogdan, 1970). Transforming the freak

show from a tawdry spectacle to one of wholesome family entertainment fit for ladies and children launched the freak show's success when coupled with the rise of railroads and greater access to transportation for touring (Durbach, 2010). Given that the success of the performance depended somewhat on the spectacular nature of the freaks inside, many circus and dime store acts competed vigorously to retain the freaks that were most successful in their acts (Dennet, 1997, 67). Andrea Stulman Dennet (1997) writes that:

George Middleton, who operated several Midwestern dime museums with C.E. Kohl, wrote in his memoirs that he hired fat women for twenty-five and fifty dollars a week; yet when a very special curiosity came along he could be persuaded to pay much more. Such was the case with "Winnie, the Fat Negress," to whom he paid the considerable salary of three hundred dollars a week. (68)

Financial success for the grueling and demanding performance schedules—often eleven shows each day over a period of twelve hours—varied widely according to the type of freak and the success of their show. Ultimately, fat ladies were dependent on the success of their performance and their particular freak show in terms of money and agency.

Although very little academic ethnography of the freak show gives more than a few lines about any individual fat performers, these small collections of facts available can still create a more complete picture of the role of the fat lady at the freak show. The trope of the fat lady in the freak show incorporated several traits and presentation styles. Fat ladies, for example, were nearly always given performing names indicating their pleasant and genial nature. Fatness and good humor were almost always conflated during this time period of the freak show (Fiedler, 1978). The earliest fat women wore conservative but voluminous dresses covering their bodies, but hinting at the flesh hidden underneath. Sometime around the turn of the century, a sharp shift in the cultural moment led to fat women festooned in revealing, frilly baby doll style dresses, presumably to add a garish contrast to the "bodily excess" on display. Though several scholars<sup>2</sup> have acknowledged the role of sexuality as an aspect of the fat lady's performance, it is impossible to say whether the fat lady's sexuality is an example of agency or not, particularly given that some audience members were allowed to touch the limbs of fat ladies, an erotic thrill to Victorian era society (Dennet, 1996). This touching of the fat lady by spectators can be read as both degrading and affirming the fat lady's erotic potential. The paradox involved in the construction of the freak show fat lady makes studying her intrigu-

ing.

### **Fat Ladies: An Analysis**

Engaging in freak show scholarship can be challenging. Disability studies scholar Michael Chemers (2008) notes that “Rare indeed are analyses [of the freak show] that avoid as unhistorical both knee-jerk condemnation and its inverse, a misguided sentimentality for lost tradition” (3). Seeing photographs designed to highlight the monstrous difference of these performers’ bodies draws the researcher’s gaze. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (2009) suggests that staring can have engaging rather than intrusive properties when the end result is engagement:

We stare when ordinary seeing fails, when we want to know more. So staring is an interrogative gesture that asks what’s going on and demands the story. The eyes hang on, working to recognize what seems illegible, order what seems unruly, know what seems strange. Staring begins as an impulse that curiosity can carry forward into engagement. (p. 3)

In other words, Garland-Thomson offers a transformative path for staring to become more—to engage with rather than to other. Freak show photography can make it entirely too easy to slip into a state of othering these performers rather than investigating their lives with a humanizing framework. In this section, I pay particular attention to the use of photographs and *cartes de visite*, a small photograph calling card popular during the time period and often sold at the freak shows as souvenirs, documenting the existence of the freak show fat ladies because these artifacts provide evidence of how fat bodies were read as freakish. These photographs call attention to the changing construction of fatness. They also offer an opportunity to engage with the stories and realities of these fat ladies as we wonder who they were and imagine possibilities for their lives. Finally, they allow us to begin connecting fatness with disability studies.

In addition, in this section I will examine the ways these women’s deaths were dealt with. Because obituaries and death rites are publicly available, they, too, serve as a useful resource, allowing us to examine the ways in which fat ladies’ bodies continued to be on display even when they were dead. Despite the differences in the individual performers’ lives, the obituaries of fat ladies carry common themes and narratives that tend towards dehumanization even while expressing amazement at the proportions of fat ladies’ bodies. The obituaries of fat women are one of the best archival records of the attitudes specifically towards fat women who performed in freak show entertainment.

One of the earliest and most famous figures of this time period was Sartjie Baartman, a South African Khoisan woman who in 1810 was brought to London, England to display to the public the size of her supposedly spectacular buttocks. Baartman spent just five years on the European continent before dying. Embedded within Sartjie Baartman's sad and short existence as a traveling performer at world fairs and other freak shows is the beginning of a long history of scientific racism and sexism spurred on by the abuse of imperialism. While Sartjie Baartman did not travel and perform as a fat woman, the public emphasis on the size and spectacle of her buttocks coupled with drawings of Baartman depicting her as larger bodied render her as a fat woman for the purposes of this analysis.

Baartman was interesting to the audiences of the nineteenth century as the epitome of hypersexuality and the portrayal African women as subhuman savages (Gilman 2010). The significant interconnection of fatness, hypersexuality, and dehumanization obvious in the treatment of Baartman reoccurs throughout other fat women's experiences in the freak show. When Baartman's experience is read with attention to the role of fatness and gender, it becomes possible to see Baartman's body defining the treatment of the fat figure after her. When examining later freak show fat ladies, the effects of Sartjie Baartman's iconic portrayal and dehumanization can be traced through their experiences, setting the tone for the cultural understanding and treatment of fat bodies. Freak show performers in the United States in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were public spectacles of private (mis)conceptions about bodily difference.

Hannah Perkins Battersby, born in 1842, began life at a reportedly average size until the effects of puberty resulted in dramatic weight gain (Hartzman, 2008<sup>3</sup>). Battersby is one of the earlier fat ladies, and as such was quite well known. Her career was made even more salacious with her marriage to fellow freak show performer, John Battersby, who performed as a shrinking man. The contrast of her hugeness to his startlingly thin frame attracted vast audiences, and the Battersby couple capitalized on their renown. Hannah Battersby, unlike many fat lady performers who were paid a weekly stipend, was paid by the pound (Hartzman, 2006). Speculations as to her



Hannah and John Battersby (<http://www.showhistory.com/FatPages/fat.html>)

actual weight vary, but her purported weight from the sideshow was 720 pounds (“Secrets of the Sideshow,” 1882). The Battersby couple managed to amass at least a small amount of money (reportedly \$10,000) before Hannah began to lose weight following health problems and John began to gain weight (Hartzman, 2008). Thus at the end of their lives, neither Battersby worked in the freak show business, but Hannah Battersby is well remembered for her role as a fat lady.

Hannah Battersby in this photograph, posed on the left side of the picture, draws the eye first because she takes up three fourths of the space in the photograph. She is dressed in an elaborate gown true to the time period that exposes only her shoulders, arms, and the top of her chest. Atop her head is a tiara. In addition, she is wearing several pieces of jewelry in the picture. John Battersby, in contrast, is merely wearing shorts and an undershirt. His body is much more exposed than Hannah’s body, making his seem far more deviant than the elegance of Hannah’s presentation.

Hannah commands most of the photograph, and her presence demands respect. Her size does not invoke mocking in this photograph, but rather a sense of elegance. What the tiara was meant to convey is unclear, but it lends her a regal air. If her husband was not posed at her side, she could possibly be mistaken for an English monarch where her girth gives her physical presence and power. Indeed, Hannah Battersby reportedly carried John out of the old Broadway Museum during a fire (“Secrets of the Sideshow,” 1882). This story of fatness lending Hannah Battersby physical power and strength to protect her husband is in direct contrast to a later story about the Battersbys and a circus fire. In this second tale, Hannah Battersby was asleep in one of the circus train cars, and when a fire broke out, was unable to leave her bunk and the car unassisted (Moffett, 1895). The fire was put out, but in this instance, Hannah Battersby’s fatness and the inaccessibility of her accommodations might have led to a tragic death by preventing her escape. Fatness in the early nineteenth century was often conflated with masculine characteristics of financial wealth, power (physical and intellectual as a business person), and a body in its healthful prime (Gilman, 2004). Of course, fat women of the time period, including Elizabeth Cady Stanton<sup>4</sup>, also were praised for their proportions as they indicated maternal success. Hannah Battersby’s fatness exemplifies the ambiguous and changing meaning of the fat body in the nineteenth century. Sometimes strikingly powerful and at other times representative of dangerous gluttony, the fat figure resisted singular national meaning.

In Frankford, Pennsylvania, where she and her husband lived in their retire-

ment, Hannah Battersby's obituary in the town newspaper represented her as a fat lady – albeit one who managed to have a loving marriage that produced a child. It includes more details about her freakishness than her character, family, or friends. The paper records that, “The enormous size of the dead woman may be more readily understood from the actual measurements of her body taken after death” and then proceeds to detail those measurements and the size of her coffin (*The Circus Scrap Book*, 1930, p. 52). Battersby's obituary also included the description of the size of her casket and the troubles surrounding making accommodations for her body to be buried. Battersby's grave was also protected by guards from any who might disrupt the grave site in order to disturb her body. In this obituary, then, fatness as a bodily curiosity does not end with death. The body itself seems to not require humanity in order to provide entertainment and to shock and awe those who seek a thrill. Unlike Battersby, Sartjie Baartman was dehumanized during her life and afterward, with her genitalia exposed and displayed. Battersby's presentation as a fully clothed, fully human freak show performer, at least while alive, clearly differentiates her from Baartman. Although Hannah Battersby likely had a better quality of life—and more agency—than Baartman, the beginning of a trend reducing fat ladies to their coffin sizes deserves scholarly attention. Dehumanization as a master narrative about a marginalized identity does not suddenly dissipate; it lingers long after its creation. While the freak show was in part a platform of agency and respect (of which Hannah Battersby had at least a small amount of between her financial success and her ability to have a marriage and a child), Hannah Battersby's obituary is ultimately a testament to her difference, and demonstrates the culture's understanding of fatness and disability as insurmountably freakish.

Another fat lady, “Big Winnie” Johnson, touted as both the “Fat Negress” and the “prized fat colored woman,” had notable experiences traveling as a black fat woman, revealing a significant interplay between race and fatness. Born in 1839 as a slave in Henry County, Kentucky, Johnson married and had ten children. After the death of her husband, in 1882, Johnson was approached by a showman, and agreed to tour as



Winnie Johnson (<http://www.showhistory.com/FatPages/fat.html>)

a fat lady. This photograph, circa 1880, shows Johnson as a beautiful woman. Her hair is curled and adorned with jeweled barrettes. She wears earrings, an elaborate pearl necklace, and at least one, possibly two rings. Johnson looks elegant in a summertime ensemble with ribbon sleeves. This presentation of Winnie Johnson conflicts, however, with available information about her.

As traveling at 849 pounds was a feat, Winnie Johnson was placed inside a railroad boxcar and was shown from the car, rather than from inside a tent with other freak show performers. Her tenure traveling with the circus included not only being trapped inside of a boxcar, but also without amenities like a bed since she supposedly was a weight that no bed could hold (Hartzman, 2008). Though virtually imprisoned during the tour in this way, Winnie Johnson was a remarkable success as a fat lady doing freak show work (Dennet, 1997). Making \$300 a week as compared to the \$25 many performers were offered, Johnson seemingly operated from a position of more agency and financial success than Baartman whose indentured service status was slavery in all but name. This photograph begs the question of why a woman making \$300 a week would agree to travel with such seemingly limited freedom. It is difficult to imagine Hannah Battersby succumbing to such treatment. Both Hannah Battersby and Baby Ruth Pontico (whose story is next), traveled with the freak show and had assistance getting in and out of the boxcars.

The fastidious presentation in her *carte de visite* may not have very accurately represented Winnie Johnson's reality as a fat lady. Johnson may have had a particular political agenda in the creation of this particular *carte de visite*. Perhaps each time the boxcar doors were cast open, Winnie Johnson was made up to encourage the public to humanize her, a woman born a slave who had become a financial success by any measure. Literary scholar Benjamin Reiss (2001) records the relationship between infamous freak show showman, P.T. Barnum and his first exhibit, Joice Heth, a black woman who supposedly nursed George Washington. Reiss (2001) draws strong correlations between Heth's treatment with Barnum and slavery. Given that information and the time period, it seems unlikely that freak show showmen and the white spectator public truly believed that Winnie Johnson was fully human. Her *carte de visite*, then, demonstrates the paradox between what we see and what scholarship about other performers indicates might have been happening behind that image.

This interrogation of agency is at the heart of the disability studies scholarship on the freak show. Freak show performers were treated neither as fully human with full agency nor entirely as subhuman slaves. Disability studies scholar Michael

Chemmers (2008) argues that the aspect of performance in the freak show allowed freaks a certain degree of autonomy in creating their act. These freaks, then, had more potential to re-create and re-imagine disability as performance rather than simply a bodily experience. However, the notion of the freak show as a potentially transgressive space is somewhat contentious within disability studies. Disability studies scholars David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder (2005) raise skepticism about the degree to which freak performers chose their jobs and acts as a consensual choice rather than a Hobson's choice. Feminist scholar Martha Mahoney (1994) is critical of simplistic notions of agency that often appear in discussions of marginalized populations, "In our society, agency and victimization are each known by the absence of the other . . . In this concept, agency does not mean acting for oneself under conditions of oppression; it means being without oppression, either having ended oppression or never having experienced it at all" (64). Mahoney's point here about agency, then, implies that agency for freak show performers consisted of acting in their best interests to the best of their ability under conditions of oppression. The critical role of disability studies in freak show scholarship is to grapple with the meaning of choice and agency. For fat ladies to have been left out of this discourse is a disservice to freak show scholarship.

At the time of Winnie Johnson's death in 1888, she was still actively performing. She had scheduled a performance in Baltimore, Maryland, but she died before making that final appearance. Her death, however, did not go unnoticed by Marylanders. Her obituary from *The Baltimore Herald* functions as the last great act of exhibition in Johnson's career as a freak show performer. Touting her weight and then moving immediately to a discussion of the difficulty of funeral and burial arrangements to accommodate her body, the obituary provides invaluable insight into attitudes towards fat performers in the nineteenth century.

Rather than a discussion of her life and information about the people who loved Winnie Johnson, the obituary and funeral closed that chapter of her life in true freak show fashion. The obituary is dedicated to a telling of the many ways in which it was difficult to accommodate Winnie Johnson's vast body inside a coffin (which had to be specially ordered), how her body had to be rolled into the coffin, that to get outside of the funeral home a window had to be removed to make space for her, the impromptu hearse required to bear the coffin, and the number of pallbearers (20) ("Big Winnie's Burial," 1888). Johnson's obituary records that, "When it was learned that 'Big Winnie' would be buried at 4 o'clock, some 600 or 700 persons gathered on the street about the house and stood expectantly to see the

huge box, containing all that remained of Winnie, carried to her last resting place” (“Big Winnie’s Burial,” 1888). Like Hannah Battersby and Sartjie Baartman, even in death, Winnie Johnson’s life was not a celebration of her success and sympathetic to her family, but the final act of her freak show career.

Baby Ruth Pontico was another well-known fat lady from the later era of the freak show. Born in 1903, Baby Ruth Pontico exemplified the stylistic changes in the fat lady performance at the freak show during the early part of the twentieth century towards the sexualization and feminization of fatness. In this 1932 photograph, autographed by a nineteen year-old Pontico, significant changes to the fat lady’s presentation are obvious. Pontico is wearing a short, satin dress that exposes her arms, chest, and her legs from mid-thigh down to her feet encased in socks and heels adorned with bows. Her hair is pulled back on one side with another bow. She wears a watch but no other jewelry.



Baby Ruth Pontico (<http://www.showhistory.com/FatPages/fat.html>)

Pontico has crossed her legs, and holds her ankle over her knee with her hand. The position looks as though it may be uncomfortable since Pontico needs to keep the pose together with her hand. The framing of the photograph is closely cropped in on Pontico’s body; she looks all the larger since she dominates nearly the entire picture. In the difference between the photographs of Hannah Battersby and Winnie Johnson and this one of Baby Ruth Pontico, it is clear that fatness in the freak show has evolved.

Baby Ruth Pontico in this photograph is wearing an outfit that in Hannah Battersby and Winnie Johnson’s time would have been considered pornographic. The blatantly erotic nature of her short, frilly dress serves to incite an ironic sexuality. The voluptuous body—indicative of womanhood—encased in frilly, hyper-feminine and girlish clothing results in this dual role of titillation and derision for the viewer of this portrait. These are the kinds of fat ladies that Leslie Fiedler (1978) describes when he writes about the erotic nature of fat ladies, “the most erotically appealing of all Freaks” (131-2). Fiedler’s grasp of the complexities of fatness during the time period, however, does not sufficiently capture what fatness mean in the context of the erotic.

Fat studies scholar Amy Erdman Farrell’s book, *Fat Shame* (2011), delves much

more deeply into the conflicting, confusing, and changing associations and meanings of the fat body during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Early in the nineteenth century, fatness and the cultural relationship to a bourgeois class made fatness a fashionable attribute. As food and labor shifted to more industrial production processes, attaining a plump figure become more common. This shifting of the kinds of bodies visible exacerbated the Victorian desire for balance, especially in the body (Huff, 2001). Fatness then indicated a flawed character and inability to manage the body as it swung too far from a balance between obese and thin (Gilman, 2010; Huff, 2001). When plumpness became attainable for a broad middle class, this cemented a link between fatness and lack of civility:

Fat became clearly identified as a physical trait that marked its bearers as people lower on the evolutionary and racial scale—Africans, “native” people, immigrants, criminals, and prostitutes. All women were also considered to be more at risk of fatness, another sign of their status lower on the evolutionary scale than men . . . Fatness, then, served as yet another attribute demarcating the divide between civilization and primitive cultures, whiteness and blackness, good and bad. (Farrell, 2011, p. 64)

Leslie Fiedler was correct in asserting that fat ladies were deeply erotic figures, but fatness was also incredibly complex. Perhaps not by Hannah Battersby or Winnie Johnson’s time, but certainly by Baby Ruth Pontico’s debut as a fat lady, the understanding of fatness, scientific sexism and racism, and deviant sexuality were culturally intertwined. This understanding makes the connection between Sartjie Baartman and Baby Ruth Pontico’s sexualized performances and subsequent dehumanization as fat ladies more clear as performances of uncivilized bodies.

Fat women who were billed as “baby” were increasingly popular following the success that Baby Ruth Pontico and her contemporaries established. This diminutive attached to the performer’s name draws continuous attention to the difference in expectation and in life sized reality, riding that line again between mockery and erotic titillation. The purported hypersexuality of fat women in the freak show was sometimes even supported by the performers themselves. Baby Ruth Pontico is quoted in *LIFE Magazine* in 1938 saying that she “Raises Spitz dogs, likes to entertain giants and human octopi with three legs” (24). This level of intrigue about who a fat woman might have sex with is certainly a later evolution of the kind of excitement generated over Sartjie Baartman’s buttocks and fat women marrying shrinking men. Sarjtie Baartman’s sexuality was treated as deviant and other, yet the public was fascinated and titillated. Although Hannah and John Battersby man-

aged to have some level of respectability, their marriage invited Victorian audiences to imagine the two of them having sex and wondering how such a thing might happen when their sizes were so different. In the 1930s, then, Baby Ruth Pontico is participating in similar constructs that allow audiences to eroticize her body. Whether Pontico herself felt liberated by this display of her sexuality or not, the audience of both the freak show and this magazine were permitted to indulge in fantasies of fat women's perverse and hypersexual nature.

Pontico was an incredibly successful freak show performer and is one of the more frequently mentioned fat ladies throughout freak show scholarship. Although Pontico's mother was a fat lady at a freak show, Pontico herself did not initially follow her mother's footsteps. Her first job was as a secretary at a law firm; she was forced to leave the job when she could not work without being stared at or sit in a chair to accommodate her weight (Hartzman, 2006). Despite turning to the freak show as a last resort, Pontico seemed to take her performance seriously; she felt that she did not measure up to the freak show billing of her as a 700 pound woman and worked to fulfill all the audience's expectations. According to some sources she did just that; she was making nearly \$300 per day in the middle of the Great Depression (Hartzman, 2006). Whether that figure is true or not, Pontico made enough money to buy a home in Florida and retrofit her home to accommodate her needs including reinforced floors and furniture (Hartzman, 2006). The sum of money that Pontico made should be enough to garner attention from freak show scholars, and yet little to nothing has been written about her experience.

Fat women at the freak show are invaluable resources for documenting and substantiating cultural narratives of fatness emerging in the United States. Their lives tell a story that we have not yet heard. If we understand freak shows as exploitative safe harbors for those with disabilities and bodily difference, understanding the fat lady's experience of hypersexual, ironic eroticism helps scholars draw conclusions about the kinds of choices freak show performers faced. Fat ladies negotiated their own desires, working to manage spectator's expectations, and pleasing showmen concerned with profitability. Bargaining more freedom for less pay or more pay to retain a successful act, fat ladies and all of the other disabled freaks mediated choices and worked within the limits of their own agency. Freak show performers lived in a world where their bodies did not belong, where other options might have been living alone or in a sanatorium. Fat ladies have stories to tell—stories that matter. Scholarship with archival research documenting the experiences and lives of fat ladies are critical projects for disability studies scholars to undertake

in order to put the fat lady where she belongs—within disability studies freak show scholarship.

### **What the Fat Lady Offers Disability Studies and Fat Studies**

In large part because of the repeated omission of the fat lady from disability studies scholarship of the freak show, the scholarship exhibits critical flaws in the theoretical frameworks most frequently offered. One of the largest oversights exists in the creation of categories of freaks at the freak shows. Often these categories are simply natural and self-made freaks. However, Andrea Stulman Dennet (1996) offers five different categories:

Natural freaks, who were born with physical or mental deformities, such as midgets and “pinheads”; self-made freaks, who cultivated freakdom, such as tattooed people; novelty artists, who were freaks because of their “freakish” performances, among them snake charmers, mesmerists, exotic curiosities such as “savages” and “cannibals,” usually billed as being from Africa; the fake freaks, or “gaffed freaks,” who faked freakishness, such as “Siamese twins” who were not attached or the “Armless Wonder” whose arms were hidden under his costume. (p. 66)

Even here, the implicit exclusion of the fat lady has led to this incomplete model of categorization. Would Dennet then classify fat people in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as “natural” freaks? Or as self-made? These binaristic categories deny the lived reality of fat women at the freak show. Although many women were fat primarily because of their biology, many records exist of fat women having their pictures taken with particular kinds of voluminous outfits to make them seem larger. Fatness as a freak show was a performance. Some fat people were encouraged to gain weight explicitly so that the freak show would be more profitable—more dramatic and profound. Other fat people were encouraged to marry very thin partners or to be exhibited with very thin people in order to capitalize on the contrast. Fat women were neither wholly “natural” nor self-made freaks. Those overly simplistic categories cannot encompass the lived realities of all of the actual performers and presences at the freak show. The inclusion of fat people at the freak show complicates and strengthens freak show analysis; without fat people the analysis of the freak show cannot be considered to be a complete or fully sensitive body of work.

Fat studies needs to explore the role of the fat lady as well. Although histories and biographies of fatness exist, the fat lady is still a missing element in the scholarship. The fat lady is a useful cultural artifact whose body functions as a record of the

attitudes towards fatness and the spectacular. Fat ladies' changing bodies disrupt neat categorizations of attitudes towards fatness. Fat ladies lived their lives behind a carefully cultivated freak show persona, seeking a place of belonging. Fat ladies do belong, and their histories need to be housed in scholarship about disability studies and fat studies.

## II Modern Spectacles of Fatness

*"The Biggest Loser"* is first and foremost a reality show, where the entertainment value is measured in extremes . . . Viewers have come to expect 100- and 200-pound miracles. Contestants who weight 300 and 400 pounds are stripped down physically and emotionally, put in form-fitting bike shorts and forced to get on a scale, as clumsy and vulnerable as the human blobs of the future in "Wall-E" . . . It's biography as body mass index, chronicled with lurid close-ups of bulging stomachs, tree trunk thighs and wobbly arms."

—"Plus Size Sideshow" *New York Times*, August 24, 2008

### Bodies on Display

The historical freak show showcased disabled and different bodies to audiences seeking to marvel at difference and yet re-affirm their own unaltered normality. This two-fold approach to the freak show—the duality between awe and revulsion—creates a tension for disability studies scholars who understand the freak show as doing both good and harmful work by allowing people with disabilities to re-envision their bodies and profit from them but also by reinforcing the value of the norm. This chapter will seek to juxtapose the historical model of the freak show against current cultural productions and interpretation of fat bodies. In the twenty-first century, the meaning of the fat body in mainstream media does not oscillate between revulsion and awe. Rather, the modern fat body is consistently defined as undesirable according to multiple frames and redefined by multiple institutions occupying intersections of power.

Fat studies scholar and sociologist Abigail Saguy (2013) outlines the ways in which the framings of fatness, particularly the medical, media, personal responsibility, and social framings, reshape the meaning of the fat body. Medical framings pathologize fatness, invoking a mutual exclusivity between fatness and health. On the other hand, another operating frame, the personal responsibility framing of fatness, places the blame/responsibility of the fat body on the individual; this type of personal responsibility is often featured in dieting advice, e.g. the calories in/calories out model. Saguy's society frame supposes that fatness is a result of some social failing, e.g. food insecurity, food deserts, poverty, lack of resources, etc. Sa-

guy argues that because each of these frames indicates a different solution, the interim result has been to villainize the fat body as a bad body, a consistent failure according to one or more of the lenses based on medical, moral, or liberal failures of the self. The focus then is on the individual facilitating the overlapping of these frames rather than offering the interesting paradoxes that the nineteenth and early twentieth century freak shows offer.

This dramatic shift in the meaning of fatness from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to the twenty-first century has an enormous impact on fat people's lived experiences. While some of the fat ladies from chapter one, like Hannah Battersby and Winnie Johnson, were able to employ various aspects of the freak show to their material advantage as audiences marveled at the girth of their figures, fat people in mainstream media today are trotted out as subhuman "drain[s] on public resources" (Saguy, 2013, p.19). Media makes clear, that the solution to fatness is weight loss. The emphasis on weight loss as a classed, morality tale works to punish, control, and police the body. These changes to the modern day presentations of fat people are reflected in changed cultural productions depicting the fat figure, particularly in reality television.

The narrative about fat, unhealthy, and lazy bodies has gained considerable cultural purchase in the media in recent years, primarily based on a widely distributed but inaccurate statistic about how many fat die from "obesity"-related illnesses each year and the healthcare burden that figure represents (Campos, 2010). The language around the "epidemic of obesity" has powerful reach and broad implications for fat people. Mainstream media has not hesitated to capitalize on the visible failings of the fat body. A new crop of television shows, both sitcom style and reality shows, beginning post-2000, after the media fascination with the "obesity epidemic," feature the fat body as a grotesque and unhealthy body symbolic of a national crisis, including *The Swan*, *Mike & Molly*, *I Used to Be Fat*, *More to Love*, *Heavy*, *Drop Dead Diva*, *Ruby*, *Dance Your Ass Off*, *My 600 -lb Life*, and *The Biggest Loser*, to name a few. These productions echo mainstream ideas and redefine the fat body in various ways. Arguably one of the most successful shows on this list, *The Biggest Loser*, is a critical site of exploration for fat studies scholars.

Frequently referred to as a "freak show" by a number of international newspapers and articles, *The Biggest Loser* functions as a modern day freak show platform, yet does not fulfill the most basic freak show definition of the nineteenth century. Disability studies scholarship insists on the critical lens of the historical freak show as an ambivalent gaze between awe and revulsion. The changed mean-

ing of fatness, however, has erased that critical ambivalent tension from modern freak show performances. The degree of difference between the nineteenth century and twenty-first century exhibits of fatness almost indicate a need for a new word for the twenty-first century freak show. The twenty-first century exhibition of fatness functions outside of the critical framework of the freak show as an ambivalent spectacle. Because of this break with the essential understanding of the freak show by disability studies scholars, the remainder of this paper will refer to displays of the fat body as spectacles or exhibits, thereby acknowledging the significant shift in meaning of freak show between the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries.

The criticism of *The Biggest Loser* as a production capitalizing on spectacle revolves around this new twenty-first century understanding of the freak show as a place of dehumanizing treatment. The epigraph at the beginning of this chapter, published in the same newspaper 120 years after the epigraphs from chapter one clearly outlines a changed understanding of the nature of freak shows. In the epigraph from this chapter, the freak show is a place where people are made “clumsy” and “vulnerable,” “forced” to publicly shame themselves in ways that no one watching would desire to do (Stanley, 2008). The exposure and spectacle of the fat body in the twenty-first century is significantly different—and worse—than the historical freak shows exhibiting the fat figure that allowed for considerably more humanizing portrayals of fatness.

Mainstream “freak show” portrayals in the twenty-first century rely exclusively on revulsion in order to police and punish the dissenting fat body. Examining the differences between modern freak shows and those of the nineteenth century highlights the changed meaning of fatness. Additionally, these differences call attention to the need for fatness to be incorporated into disability studies’ freak show scholarship, probing both the historical and modern function of the fat body within the freak show. In an article examining the neo-liberal politics of *The Biggest Loser*, Silk, Francombe, and Bachelor (2009) articulate the cultural impact of the show:

The obese are thus discursively constituted as a “problem” to be managed, an immoral non-productive citizen discursively and visually constituted as ‘other’—subject to control and exclusion. *The Biggest Loser* then divisions blame and responsibility for an “unhealthy” body politic, classified the obese, overweight and physically unfit as personal moral failures, while simultaneously denoting the expansion and intensification of the “normal,” idealized, aspired to, consumerized body—the corporeoconomics—within the cultural realm . . . *The Biggest Loser* provides the obese quite literally

with the digital currency and practices with which they should conduct their everyday lives. Failure to conform, to conduct oneself in line with this menu, positions one as abject, personally responsible for a body that does not belong to a consumerized neo-liberal and militarized society. (384)

Silk, Francombe, and Bachelor examine the issue of the individual responsibility frame from the perspective of political science and economics, investigating the benefit of culturally attributing the “flaws” of fatness to individual morality rather than a complex host of causes not yet fully understood by the healthcare industry. The lack of well-determined medical knowledge about fatness has not stopped the weight loss industry from selling an abundance of improbable solutions, from weight loss pills to bariatric surgery, all designed to eliminate the fat body forever. Here, another aspect of the “blame” of fatness is in the conceptualizing of a fat citizen as a failed citizen. Rather than someone who is able to discipline themselves in a society where one could make a host of choices, individuals are expected to practice constraint over their choices, making those deemed “right.” In *The Biggest Loser*, this framework of making the “right” choice is used to discipline the wayward body into one that can be “moderate” and “healthy”—according to the show, “lifting yourself up” rather than “beating yourself down.” The show, of course, is only too happy to do that for you.

As a show, the premise of *The Biggest Loser* is to bring fifteen fat, adult contestants to a filming location where the contestants work with trainers in order to lose the most weight and win a quarter of a million dollars. Currently in its fourteenth season since beginning in 2004, *The Biggest Loser* has been incredibly successful in the United States, and has spawned a number of international versions of the show. For me, as a fat studies scholar and fat individual, *The Biggest Loser* is both reprehensible and triggering. Contestants on the show are exposed to a number of behaviors that, broadly defined, constitute dehumanization as well as verbal, emotional, and physical abuse. *The Biggest Loser* functions as a humiliating freak show platform, yet fails to integrate the same duality of nineteenth century freak shows. Rather, this twenty-first century freak show, exploits the fat body for kyriarchal, capitalist gain.

### **Tracing Change – Similarities and Differences**

*The Biggest Loser* invites its audience to casually pass judgment on the bodies they parade. Like historical freak shows, *The Biggest Loser* proffers different bodies for the consumption and entertainment of those assumed to be the norm. The

contestants on the show are real people, who provide their own narratives about why they are fat, what the side effects are, and why they are on the show. These fat people tell stories in order to connect with the audience, and those stories have significant patterns revealing the meaning and stigma of fatness. One element of the freak show that remains the same is the attempt to fashion narratives about fatness in order to connect with the audience. Historically, performers like Battersby and Johnson were not required to trot out stories about how terrible their lives were as fat women. The audience didn't want to know about terrible. The audience was there for the thrill of something exciting and different. We know that fat women like Battersby, Johnson, and Pontico all had their own agendas in their performances and relationships to their embodied experiences. What represents a significant change, however, is that the stories that *The Biggest Loser* contestants tell all have similar, overarching narratives reflective of medical, media, and personal responsibility framings of fatness.

The contestants on the current season, season fourteen (2013), of *The Biggest Loser* approach their relationship to their own fat bodies from similar perspectives. Whether or not their fatness is a new development/struggle in their adult lives or something beginning in childhood, each of the contestants weaves a personal narrative, which to a disability studies scholar, emphasizes the stigma of the fat body in the current cultural context. From concerns about health to desiring to be attractive enough to wear a bikini or get married, these contestants understand fat bodies as bad bodies – bodies in need of transformation and reform. These quotes from the contestants' biographies on *The Biggest Loser* website reveal desire for transformation:

“I have overcome so many challenges in my life, and my weight is the one thing that is holding me back from achieving everything that I have dreamed of.”

“I want to be the best me that I can be in all aspects of my life, including winning this losing battle with my weight. I no longer want to be insecure and self-conscious.”

“I really want to start truly living my life. I'm tired of staying in on a Friday night because I feel like I don't look good.”

“I am lost, literally, in all that I have become with my weight gain. I'm under here somewhere, underneath all of these pounds that weigh not only on my body, but emotionally on my heart as well.”

These direct quotes are taken from four different women on the show. Although when watching the show, the men also make claims about the stigma they face because of fatness, there are no comparable quotes in their bios on the website. The largest contestant of this season, Michael, characterizes his fat in the season premiere as “selfish” because he is putting his needs above his infant son’s when he is “on the verge of death” because of his fatness. Somewhat oddly, the significance of this claim is not emphasized on the website in his biography. While the women on the show commonly express the notion that there is a thin body hiding inside of them, this is not something echoed by the men on the show in the biographies. Although this does not necessarily support the gendered differences in the treatment of fat men and women, there is a highly gendered and critical difference in the treatment of fat men and women. Fat studies and feminist scholars have established the many ways in which the beauty myth functions as an extension of patriarchal control over women’s bodies including the size and physical presence of those bodies (Wolf, 1991; Bordo, 1993; Bergman, 2009).

The stigma of the fat body is apparent. These women feel that the size of their body literally inhibits them from functioning as a part of our social fabric. Rather than participating in social activities, these women collectively feel that their body size makes them unable to be sexual, reach goals, and live their lives despite the fact that almost all of them have college degrees and successful jobs. One woman on the show is an incredibly successful lawyer, yet because of her fatness expresses extreme insecurity that when she dies her husband (who she views as much more attractive than her) will easily find someone much better than her. Again, these contestants typically have college degrees, successful jobs, many have families and/or are married to significant others, and generally meet the minimum standards of the middle class lifestyle. With the exception of their fatness, these contestants lead conventionally successful lives, yet still feel as though they are not yet able to “be themselves.” These contestants are articulating the omnipresent cultural narrative of the twenty-first century that losing weight will “solve” the “problems” (and often stigma) caused by being fat.

Fat studies scholars and activists would be quick to assert that this rationale is problematic. It is dehumanizing to insist that your life can only be truly lived after you have lost weight/fit a certain standard of attraction. Additionally, disability studies scholars should be able to quickly identify similarities in narratives about fat bodies and disabled bodies. One of the most common narratives about disability is the hope for a cure. Disability scholars have thoughtfully articulated a number

of responses to the cure narrative including this one from Susan Wendell (1996):

I would joyfully accept a cure, but I do not need one . . . People who take it for granted that it could be a good thing to wipe out all biological causes of disability (as opposed to social causes) are far more confident that they know how to perfect nature and humanity than I am . . . What else besides suffering might we lose in the process? And would they know where to stop? Certainly, those who do not value the differences of people with disabilities cannot be trusted to decide where to stop trying to “perfect” human beings. (p. 84)

Here, the tools that disability studies use to query the meaning of disability and the quest for “better” are useful when broadly applied to the experiences of fat stigma. Rather than seeking a curative approach to fatness, control over the norms of body size should be questioned as oppressive and regulatory with what is ultimately a eugenic goal in mind. If the goal of changing people with “bad” bodies is to make them fit better in a socially constructed world built for a very particular kind of privileged body, then we haven’t addressed the issue of that privilege. Disability studies, and Susan Wendell in this passage, insists that notions of better bodies must be balanced with an understanding of how social conditions create stigma—create these “bad” bodies. Helpfully, changing the social conditions that create disability and fatness can be relatively easy (i.e. creating large seats on airplanes and in classrooms) whereas billions of dollars spent in research and diet aids have so far neglected to actually “solve” the problem of the fat body at all.

The stigma of the fat body in the twenty-first century exhibit is one of the primary reasons why there is a fundamental distinction between it and the historical freak show. Historical freak shows were not performed with a purpose other than to present the spectacular, and to invite the curious gaze for a profit. This twenty-first century spectacle is performing another function entirely. Rather than invite the gaze of the public, *The Biggest Loser* is a television show premised on the notion that these bodies are unhealthy and need to change. The contestants on *The Biggest Loser* are exhibited, certainly, but they are exhibited with the purpose of shame and with a trajectory of reform. Bodily reform as a requirement for embodiment or fully human portrayal is dehumanizing, and the regularity of these kinds of performances in various reality television shows is disturbing. The agenda of the twenty-first century exhibit is markedly different and worse for these performers of fatness. Rather than progressing in a new liberal notion of acceptance, the increased stigma of the fat body has resulted in poorer treatment than a century ago.

When “progress” leads to worse treatment and oppression of a category of people, the forward motion of that movement must be investigated and held accountable. Scholarly intervention is critical in calling for an examination of the eugenic principles underlying popular media presentations of fatness.

While news articles linking *The Biggest Loser* and the freak show make the inaccurate connection working on the underlying principle that freak shows are always bad spaces, disability studies scholars are able to assert a more dynamic view of the freak show. Historically, freak shows were often a mixed bag for performers based on a number of different claims to and impediments from their own agency as performers. Eli Clare (2009) draws clear distinctions between those freak show performers who had more agency and made fortunes attributing to the freak show their ability to reject medical frameworks and those freak show performers who had such little agency that their positions may well be the equivalent of slavery<sup>5</sup>. Those distinctions about agency are less obvious in *The Biggest Loser*. There are a wide range of people from various social locations of age, race, gender, sexuality, and class. The one social location they all share is fatness, and the stories that they tell often reveal a long, fraught relationship to their fat bodies.

The question of agency is still critical in the modern cultural spectacle. One of the principal logistical changes in the freak show dynamic is that these new freak shows have been displaced from the circus act, and are often now part of a media empire. *The Biggest Loser* is a reality television show, and thus differs from reality in significant ways. The footage from filming is cut in order to uphold tenants of *The Biggest Loser's* primary objective, that this is a show about fat people who are helped to become better citizens in all areas of their lives. Very few *Biggest Loser* contestants have publicly talked about their experiences on the show. One of those people who have spoken against the show is Kai Hibbard, a contestant on season three who lost one hundred and forty four pounds during the course of the show.

In an interview with a fat acceptance blogger, Golda Poretzky, on the website BodyLoveWellness, Hibbard speaks about the construction of the television show. What the viewer sees is vastly different from the reality of the show for the contestants, according to Hibbard. She talks about producers who overrode doctor's recommendations, trainers who have no nutritional background, and the subsequent eating disorder that she developed during the course of the show as a response to the extreme fat hatred and exercise regimen the show's producers enforced. Additionally, all contestants on the show sign incredibly tricky contracts with the constant threat of being sued if they speak out about the show in a negative way while

under contract. Hibbard reveals that:

You really get brainwashed into thinking everything's your fault, [that] you're just not strong enough, you're just not good enough. . . . For example, Heather, on my season, was told by the medical trainer, not one of the personal trainers, . . . "Here's the deal, both your knees are messed up, and I believe you ripped your calf muscle." So he told the trainer that too but when you watch the show, Heather's arguing with our trainer and saying, "Look, I can't do it." And they made it look like it's because she's lazy and refuses to work out, when actually she's been told by the doctors, "Do not run, do not do this, you cannot do this." And production and her personal trainer wanted her to do it anyway, just for the cameras. And when she refused to do it for the cameras because it would have damaged her body even more (she ended up needing steroid shots in both knees while we were still there by the way) it was edited to make her look like she was lazy and disobedient, basically. So then you've got the 22 million Americans that watch it thinking that you're this horrible, lazy, ungrateful person. And she literally got death threats on the NBC web site. I just have people that tell me stuff like, I'm ugly when I cry, or I'm lazy. She got death threats. (Poretzky, 2010)

According to Kai Hibbard's interview, there is no possible way to determine what the contestants actually experience based on the footage from the show. Here, then each piece of media disseminated by *The Biggest Loser* needs to be assumed to be a narrative constructed with particular ends in mind. The aims of *The Biggest Loser* need to be investigated thoroughly. Historical freak shows had the ability to stage photographs, but modern freak shows have an increased power to present a more convincing video record controlled explicitly by the production team rather than the performer. The agency of those people in modern spectacles like *The Biggest Loser* is much more limited than some of the fat women in the historical freak shows explored in section one. The contestants on *The Biggest Loser* experience a significant loss in agency and in their ability to control, subvert, or redirect the gaze of the public, unlike the historical freak show performers.

### **Spectacle as Entertainment**

Historical freak shows often employed routines that emphasized difference. So, fat women performers might do a song and dance routine to highlight the differ-

ence between them and more mainstream, thin entertainers. Fat women might also be portrayed as particularly girlish to emphasize the imagined excessive sexuality of their bodies and size, like Baby Ruth Pontico. By comparison, modern day spectacles are less interested in the excessive sexuality of fat bodies, and more interested in watching those fat bodies experience punishment. The hour by hour footage that constitutes *The Biggest Loser* is almost entirely footage of fat people exercising for hours at a time. The fat bodies that the audience is supposed to find so repellent are being re-shaped into those types of bodies that are familiar and praised. The extreme exercise regimens on the show become torture for entertainment purposes.

The first show of every season almost always includes scenes of the contestants violently throwing up within the first few minutes of intense workouts, and being told to get up and keep going by the trainers on the show. On the season premier of the fourteenth season (2013), the audience is not kept waiting. Within the first five minutes of the first work out, one of the contestants, Nathan, falls off of the treadmill. As the workout continues, someone violently expels vomit. Another person, Jackson, collapses and falls off of the treadmill. He cannot be woken up and needs medical attention. The contestants are clutching their chests in a concerning way, indicating an impaired ability to breathe through the exercise. Meanwhile, Nathan's second collapse gets him kicked out of the gym as punishment. Ultimately, Jillian, the show's most infamous trainer for her toughness, kicks three people out of the gym on the first day for failing to meet expectations of performance.

Jillian believes it is her job to be harsh because the contestant are framed as individuals who have quit their entire lives, and are now quitting within the first 20 minutes of their first workout. Jillian frequently uses the clichéd phrase, "It's do or die time" in a situation where it sounds more like a threat than encouragement when she's shouting it at a contestant clutching his chest alarmingly. According to Jillian, being fat is an addiction to being a victim and a victim mentality, and it is her belief that requiring the contestants to do incredibly taxing physical activity is the key to breaking down this mentality. The remainder of the show is interspersed with moments of encouraging advice from the trainers working in concert with dehumanization as the contestants alternatively succeed in meeting the trainer's expectations or lean over buckets, vomiting in failure.

The nineteenth century freak show was about showcasing difference in order to make a profit. The twenty-first century spectacle still seeks to turn a profit, but the aims are drastically different. Rather than showing bodily difference, the new freak show is selling a narrative about change. According to the structure of *The Biggest*

*Loser*, these bodies that were once revolting and fat are now changed into bodies that fit the norm and standard of society. In the process, these fat people have been saved from any number of dire health concerns, have regained their sexuality and lives, and become better citizens. *The Biggest Loser*, then, is not selling us imagery of fat bodies; they are selling us a cure. The show and trainers are in fact selling a cure to the public through sales of workout videos, diet plans, and other weight loss assistance through the show's website. The fat body in this modern spectacle is a vehicle for increased capital gain outside of the performance of fatness. The disgust inspired by the fleshy displays at weigh-ins, coupled with the motivation that viewers, too, can change the ordinary trajectory of their lives and become extraordinary through thinness is radically different from the historical freak show.

The executive producer of *The Biggest Loser*, JD Roth, understands the show as one with a particular agenda to deliver about the necessity of the fat body becoming a thin body for health reasons. Rather than torture for entertainment, Roth sees the show filling an inspirational void for fat people watching from home, "The goal is can we inspire people in America to make a change in their life. In that, we're battling 1,000" (Wyatt, 2009). Here then, the ostensible goal of the freak show performer/show contestant is to change the viewer, according to the producer. Although couching the goal of this show in patronizing, so-called inspirational messages to a fat viewing audience, the reality of *The Biggest Loser* is that this is a modern spectacle asking contestants to reject advice from countless doctors about the appropriate way to achieve weight loss at the risk of their own health.

*The Biggest Loser* works explicitly to create change in the viewer's own life and to inspire weight loss as a goal for the audience. Thus, in the production of fatness on *The Biggest Loser*, fat must inherently be villainized and castigated as completely bad, wholly other. The treatment of the contestants on



Retrieved from: <http://200poundquest.com/biggest-loser-season-14/biggest-loser-recap-episode-9.html>

is to deny them basic humanity as fat people. This humanity must be earned throughout the course of the show, through ascetic discipline of the body, and presumably of the flawed character. Only then, when the contestant has lost a vast amount of weight and satis-

fied the requisites can the previously fat figure assume its full humanity.

Episode nine of the current season exemplifies the culture of the transformation and rebirth in *The Biggest Loser*. Entitled “Face Your Fear” (Bartley, 2013), this episode had remaining contestants all engage in various activities they feared. Gina, a successful lawyer from Alabama who is married with children, told her trainer, Jillian that she had a fear of small, dark spaces. For her fear challenge, Jillian brought a coffin to the ranch and told Gina that she had to get inside of this coffin—her coffin if she didn’t change her habits and her destructive attitude on the show—for twenty minutes. Crying, Gina is inside the coffin with Jillian outside, leaning on it and talking her through the rebirth of her independent attitude. According to Jillian, the show was the one thing standing between Gina and that coffin. Gina quickly agrees and echoes that rhetoric, saying that the process would work if she let it. Rather than allowing Gina to believe that she deserves fully human treatment, this challenge created an environment where Gina quickly became repentant, promising cooperation and proclaiming that she is “different” now.

For the winner of season fourteen, Danni Allen, a woman who was afraid to pursue her potentially lucrative career as a singer because of her fatness, transformation is taken to a visibly dramatic level. Her weight loss is so dramatic that she doesn’t actually look like the same individual as before. Danni is someone who has fully integrated the spectacle of weight loss into her own personal life. In an interview after she won the finale, Danni told the reporter that, “She is making a shadow-box display of her jeans, showing the 20-plus-sized jeans she wore before arriving at the ranch, the size-10 jeans she wore midway through her journey, and now the size-4 jeans that slide on quite easily, thank you” (Lynch, 2013). This embrace of the spectacle of her own body and the belief in the transformative power of weight loss and a vehicle for character development reflects the values and beliefs that *The Biggest Loser* has always and continues to preach to its contestants and viewers. In this photograph pulled from *The Biggest Loser*’s website, the overhaul of Danni’s appearance is obvious. The “before” Danni is running. Her face is sweaty



Retrieved from: <http://www.nbc.com/the-biggest-loser/photos/dannis-finale-photos/12948/#item=281734>

and flushed. Hers is a body in motion, in the active engagement of body reform. In the “after” side, Danni’s posture is confident, in a pose that evokes sexiness rather than sweat. Her hair color and style are very different, which, when coupled with the changes in her facial structure from the weight loss (46% of her body weight at the beginning of the season), makes her look like a different person. “After” Danni is sexy, smiling, and confident. There should be no doubt in the viewer’s mind that this transformative process was worth all the time and effort, that for this 26 year old, the “pay off”—aside from the \$250,000—is obvious.

Fatness and fat bodies in *The Biggest Loser* become liminal bodies. They are bodies entrenched in constant, dramatic change, and we see this in Danni’s photograph. The visibility of the loss of fat is a crucial element of the show. Some of the biggest contestants weigh upwards of 400 pounds, making a dramatic weight loss incredibly visual as the contestants weigh in each week in little more than spandex shorts. The fat body is on display in all of its fleshy vulnerability, literally counted, pound for pound. Here, *The Biggest Loser* models a broader cultural construct about the treatment of fat people. The fat body only receives encouragement, accolade, and/or acknowledgement when that fat body is being recognized as liminal. Fatness must always be in the process of disappearing. Fat people must always be in the process of eliminating (pounds, desserts, and all of their own terrible, fatal flaws) in order to be validated as a human being. And yet, the validation is conditional on visible results, on bodily reduction. Improved cardiovascular health from exercise goes unremarked; the fat body must be in the process of becoming less fat, not explicitly more “healthy,” as indicated by cardiovascular health. Typical Americans marked as fat may really only have their body acknowledged as a body that is liminal, that is in the process of changing, slimming. Television shows like *The Biggest Loser* have an effect. Narratives give meaning and shape how we understand fatness and the fat figure; bad narratives create meaning for bad bodies.

### **Conclusion – Moving Forward in Solidarity**

Exploration of the freak show from the historical to the modern spectacle makes possible an understanding of the changed meaning of fatness, and also the ways in which mainstream media places somewhat surprising limitations on performer agency as compared to the historical freak show. The historical freak show was a space at least open to subversive narratives about fatness. Hannah Battersby, Winnie Johnson, and Ruth Pontico all explored their potential as fat female performers. Battersby’s fascinating relationship with her husband reversed normative

gender roles, and Battersby looked like a queen while doing it. Winnie Johnson made a lot of money during her time period, intentionally profiting off of the white gaze. For a woman who was born a slave, Johnson's fully human freak show performance is one in which she deployed the white gaze for her own profit, thereby capitalizing on the kinds of people who might have initially profited from her body, and those of her ancestors. Ruth Pontico, on the other hand, happily sat on stage at the freak show reveling in the lust filled gaze of men, who even if they mocked her, could also not stop themselves from wondering what it might feel like to be intimate with her and all of her fleshy body. These historical freak show fat ladies can all be viewed as women with agency, subverting the possibly alienating gaze of the viewing public. These performers actively subverted norms and structured their own appearance and presentation according to each performer's unique agenda.

Unlike Battersby, Johnson, and Pontico, the contestants on *The Biggest Loser* have much less autonomy in designing and deploying their own understanding of their fatness. All of the contestants on *The Biggest Loser* are selected because of their dedication to change and re-shaping their "bad" bodies. The sameness of the rhetoric and the presentations of their fallible bodies and character traits are strategies organized by the show in pursuit of capitalist gain. These contestants are not unique individuals imbued with full humanity: they are tools of a consumer driven and neoliberal society. The neoliberal notions of individuality and pulling yourself up by your bootstraps in order to conform to norms of what it means to be a good citizen are clear in this modern spectacle, juxtaposing the more limited freedom agency of fat people in the twenty-first century against fat women in the nineteenth century to surprising and disappointing realizations about the subversive potential of fatness today.

However, while *The Biggest Loser* is one platform showcasing the fat body as a body in need of reform, there are other narratives that also exist and provide more hope for the future. Fictional representations of fat people on television are not wholly negative. In fact, a new British television show, *My Mad Fat Diary*, is getting considerable recognition as a positive representation of a fat teenager struggling with a mental illness. Fat people and fat activists are using other forms of media, particularly social media in order to create community and solidarity and to work together to produce alternative narratives about fatness and the fat figure. Fat activist and blogger, Lesley Kinzel (2012) writes that, "Our bodies are often mistaken for public property, but they are a mode of public discourse . . . Your body will draw attention. How you use it is up to you" (36). There is a burgeoning wealth of fat ac-



Retrieved from <http://heyfatchick.tumblr.com/image/19121870135>

tivism and resources online, and those online body projects of reclaiming work to combat the narratives produced and re-produced by *The Biggest Loser*. Although the blogger community does not yet have the sway to insist that NBC cease creation of *The Biggest Loser*, they can work from the margins and towards more powerful collective organizing and resistance.

Some of the most critical work that fat activist communities on the internet are engaged with is offering alternative narratives about health. In a cultural moment in which “health” is a major buzzword with plenty of policing power, advocates for the Health at Every Size movement are making visible new possibilities of what health can look like. This

photograph is typical of the types of photographs of fat people living good lives that are interesting and rewarding.

With increased awareness and recognition of how the disability rights and fat activist experiences and goals overlap in historical as well as modern ways, scholars and activists can more effectively support and call for resistance and change. What one movement has already understood, a new movement has not yet fully articulated. This collective collaboration between movements with similar, but perhaps not the same goals is a step in the direction of critical mass resistance. *The Biggest Loser* exploits fat bodies for the purposes of entertainment and re-marshalling a wayward body and citizen. On the other hand, the historical freak show makes clear that when performers have more agency and control over the ways in which they engage with their audience and the public gaze, subversion is not only possible, but probable. Redirecting our own gaze to the past may help us to envision a better future, a future of belonging and space for all bodies.

### Notes

Amber Cantrell graduated summa cum laude from the Honors College of the College of Charleston with a Bachelor of Arts in Women’s and Gender Studies in the spring of 2013. Originally from Greenville, South Carolina, Amber’s research on the intersection of fat studies and disability studies will take her to New Jersey in 2013 for a PhD program in Women’s and Gender Studies at Rutgers University with full funding. This project, “Fat Ladies at the Freak Show: Making Possible Critical

Intersections of Fat Studies and Disability Studies” was the first chapter of Amber’s Bachelor’s Essay, directed by Alison Piepmeier during her senior year.

1. For example see Rosemarie Garland Thomson (1996, 1997, 2009), Michael Chemers (2008), Rachel Adams (2001), Sharon Snyder & David Mitchell (1997, 2000, 2010), Cynthia Wu (2012), Meghan L. Burke (2012), and Heather Thompson-Gillis (2009).

2. Leslie Fiedler (1978), Andrea Stulman Dennet (1997), and Robert Bogdan (1990)

3. Mark Hartzman’s book, *American Sideshow*, while not a scholarly book, has some of the most detailed information about fat ladies outside of the obituaries.

4. Susan B. Anthony, unlike her friend Stanton, was ridiculed in the press as being “unsexed” and “uncivilized” because her body lacked all manner of womanly characteristics including maternal warmth (Farrell, 2012, 87). However, while Stanton experienced some praise of her body in earlier decades, by the end of the nineteenth century, praise of the fat body easily gave way to censure as a primitive body (Farrell, 2012). Fat or thin, then, early feminists bodies were subjected to stringent scrutiny seeking to undermine their arguments by invalidating their bodies.

5. Specifically, Clare negotiated what choice and freak meant in the context of performers touted as “wild men” and “missing links.” Many “wild men” performers were originally people from Africa, brought to the American continent one way or another and then forced, coaxed, or encouraged to perform raced savagery. These performers may not have spoken English or been able to negotiate pay. Additionally, those performers who were “missing links” between apes and men were often people with intellectual disabilities and/or raced bodies marking them as savage. Under these constraints of agency, notions of choice in the freak show become much murkier.

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