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### **Carnival Does Not Know Footlights**

Performance studies scholars, especially those interested in the circus arts, have long leveraged Bakhtin's carnivalesque to illuminate the utopian character of the circus and its affiliates. "In fact, carnival does not know footlights," Bakhtin writes, "in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators . . . Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people" (7). Such utopian readings of the circus, carnival, or freak show highlight the imagined sense of equality between performer and spectator within the carnival space, allowing for the emergence of what Ernest Bloch calls *vor-scheinn*, an anticipatory illumination of what the world could be.

Michael M. Chemers takes up the concept of *vor-scheinn* in his book *Staging Stigma: A Critical Examination of the American Freak Show*, in which he ponders the limits of the what he terms "freaktopia" – a heterotopic space that welcomes diverse forms of kinship via the exchange between performers and audiences. Garland-Thomson certainly suggests that by engaging in dynamic staring encounters, freak shows as a performance genre can create this kind of illumination in audiences about their own responses to disability. Nancy Bombaci further reads the "heterotopia" of freak shows as a carnivalesque inversion that "inverts and restructures conventional values," providing a utopian allure to normative spectators (7). However, these readings of freak shows posit a utopic space in which there is still a divide between actor and audience, rather than a shared sense of equality between the two parties. Chemers does suggest,

however, that “freaktopia” might mean more for the insiders of the carnival – the freaks – than it does for the outsiders looking in.

Taking up Chemers, I want to interrogate what it means to read circuses and carnivals as utopias or freaktopias that reimagines relationships between disabled and able-bodied people, and consider the role of capital in brokering such exchanges. Shuttling between realist and speculative modes as readily as it moves between the past of the Binewski Carnival Fabulon and the present of Portland, Oregon, Katherine Dunn’s *Geek Love* has received much critical attention in both feminist and disability studies as a novel that radically deconstructs feminized labor and centers disabled bodies and lives within the tall tale of this family gone nuclear. This presentation builds on this body of scholarship by examining the novel’s critique of the circus as a utopian space as the fundamental tool through which it is able to imagine a world of matrilineal, collective kinship in which visibly disabled women care for and about each other -- even from a distance.

I have written extensively about the appropriation of the utopian space of the circus or carnival by the countercultural movements of the late 1960s and 1970s – the very culture in which Katherine Dunn began writing experimental novels like *Attic* and *Truck*. If we read the circus as creating a space for anticipatory illumination between audiences and spectators, we must also acknowledge that these moments of shared equality in the Bakhtinian performative tradition also enable the fiction that allows for the appropriation of the freak show by ‘norms’ in service of their own ontological inquiry. Bombaci lauds this appropriation as resulting from a desire for ‘an expanded consciousness through the emulation of marginalized people’ and that this appropriation is ‘not an act of capitalist oppression or psychological dominance, but a means of identifying with those rejected by the cultural mainstream.’ When we examine contemporary

freak shows, however, what you'll most likely see is a group of youngish white, heterosexual men seeking some sort of escape from conventional normalcy by appropriating the very categories of oppression they once performatively placed on others. Daniel Foss and Leslie Fiedler have theorized the roots of this willful enfreakment as a countercultural formation, one which I have argued plays out in the contemporary culture of sideshows as a performance of white, capitalist masculinity.

*Geek Love* is also critical of the role of white, capitalist, patriarchal masculinity in within supposedly utopian spaces like the circus. In my close reading of plot points and key passages from Dunn's remarkably strange novel, I seek to highlight this critical position, and illustrate how the novel damns the utopian vision of the circus in favor of creating models of disabled, feminist kinship outside of the big top. Though I could speak about this novel for hours on end, I want to illustrate how the novel reworks utopia in three movements: first, through the capitalist utopia of the family business that is the Binewski Carnival Fabulon; second, a critique of how this capitalist, patriarchal system fails as a utopia; third, how the women of *Geek Love* remake models of kinship in the real world after the spectacular explosion of the Binewski Carnival Fabulon.

In *Reading Embodied Citizenship*, Emily Russell keenly notes that the family business structure of the Binewski Carnival Fabulon establishes the Binewski children as "embodied commodities" (134). Through their not-all-that-unusual reproductive modalities, Al and Lil genetically engineer their children by "experimenting with illicit and prescription drugs, insecticides, and eventually radioisotopes" in order to give their children the gift of "making a living simply by being themselves" (Dunn 7). As such, the children themselves are commodities that must work in the family business in order to participate in the utopian space of their roving

trailer home. And it is indeed utopian, at first. The opening scene of the novel, one of my favorites in contemporary American literature, is idyllic: Papa spinning stories as Mama stitches shirts, with a gaggle of children gathered around to take in the tale of their parents' early courtship. What seems more perfect than a scene imbued with this amount of familial love? Oly, the narrator, even emphasizes that she felt "safe in our portable village," treating her carnival caravan as its own little refuge from the outside world (Dunn 3). But although Crystal Lil, the Binewski matriarch, is described as "an eager partner . . . in their creative collaboration," the idea to "breed his own freak show" is primarily "Al's scheme" – a last ditch effort to save the carnival he inherited at the age of 24 from the hard times that had befallen it.

Oly describes her father as "a standard-issue Yankee, set on self-determination and independence" as well as a man with a "core of genius" (Dunn 7). As showrunner, big boss, and paterfamilias, Al retains the authority of the masculine in every endeavor. As even their "failed experiments" could be considered embodied commodities within the carnival world it was Al's decision to keep a shrine to display all the deceased or never-quite-alive Binewski children. Oly describes the Jarkin as "Al's failures," undoing her mother's part in the so-called "creative collaboration." Lily, to her credit, follows this line with the words, "And mine," in an attempt to reassert her status as Al's creative partner (Dunn 53). But even Crystal Lil cowers to Al's authority, failing to achieve equal partnership within the carnival utopia. When the baby of the family, Fortunato aka Chick, is born without any visible birth defects, Lil calls to Al's authority to confirm what she already knows: "I did everything, Al . . . I did what you said, Al . . . What happened, Al? How could this happen?" (64). Even the Binewski children retain paternal authority as the only authority that matters, especially when it comes to their roles as embodied commodities within the family business. Although there is no separation form work life and

home life within the family business of the carnival, the children are grateful for their contributions when they are rewarded with paternal affection. Oly recalls, “Papa would tell us about the hard times and explain that Arty had brought success to the show, and that Elly and Iphy had helped the business, and, because he was a kind man, that even Oly had ‘done her part.’ There was always work but it was good” (47). As embodied commodities, the children must follow the wants of capitalism and compete with each other to have the best act in the show, therefore proving their value to the family. Although Al tries to placate Oly, whose work as the carnival barker isn’t nearly as valuable as that of her brother Arturo the AquaBoy or her sisters Elly and Iphy, the piano-playing conjoined twins, his hierarchizing of his children’s success proves that paternal authority and capitalist authority are twin systems that disrupt the utopic nature of the ideal American family as presented in the opening pages of the novel.

It is also important to note that Al’s masculine authority is not only derived from his position as patriarch of the family and showrunner of the Binewski Carnival Fabulon, but from his able-bodiedness. He is the normative center of a highly abnormal world, father to a host of disabled children, and lover of a woman who becomes disabled by her chemical dependencies. Al’s authoritative seat within the Binewski Carnival Fabulon may, on the one hand, read as egalitarian in the way Al welcomes and cultivates a world-view that welcomes disability-inspired ways of being (and, one must certainly say, inspires them himself), but on the other hand, I can’t help but read Al as part and parcel of the grand American circus tradition of white, masculine, able-bodied capitalist showrunners: a “standard-issue Yankee” just like P.T. Barnum before him, and Ward Hall after him. Circus showrunners, both in narrative tradition and in history, prize the ingenuity of the self-made man, which reveals circus utopias to be created not in the image of the people who reside within the trailer caravan or under the big top -- who may indeed come from a

variety of walks of life, racial and ethnic backgrounds, class positions, gender and sexual identities, and abilities – but in the image of the men they are organized around. In Al's professed desire to breed his own freak show to save the family business from financial ruin, bolstered by the way he lauds his children's participation as embodied commodities, it does not seem reasonable to say, as Bombaci might, that Al's interested in his utopian carnival world results from a desire for "expanded consciousness through the emulation of marginalized people," but is rather clearly an act of capitalist oppression and, in some ways, psychological dominance.

And just as patriarchy is passed down from men in power to other men in power, so too does Al Binewski anoint his oldest son Arturo the AquaBoy to inherit the Fabulon, an idea that takes such deep root in Arty's mind that he begins to use his seat of power as eldest son, proto-patriarch, and top-selling act in the carnival to crush any competition by his siblings and form his own pseudo-religious cult, using psychological dominance to remake the world in his own image by convincing thousands of followers to slowly shed their limbs to achieve the ultimate Arturan goals of peace, isolation, and purity. In comparison, Al's patriarchal power seems almost benign or benevolent compared to his eldest son's. Al's intentions are good. Lily consents to participation in creating her carnival family, even though she sacrifices her own body to do so. Arty's motivations lie solely in his ability to be a model acquisitive capitalist, a way of leveraging his commodified embodiment for his own gain. He does so by following the capitalist modalities laid out for him by his own father: harnessing control of the laboring capacity of the bodies that surround him. Arty makes use of the carnival's redheaded salesgirls for sexual pleasure, orders around the roustabouts to build his show up to new heights, employs his sister Oly as his personal servant (which her complex feelings for her brother make her a more than

willing participant in), extracts indentured servitude from his telekinetic little brother Chick, effectively puts his parents out to pasture, and cuts off his sisters' ability to earn an independent living as sex workers by forcing them to carry an unplanned pregnancy to term. While there is a lot to unpack in Arty's methodology, and while I'd love to spend an entire hour talking about cults (from which the circus is not altogether that distinct), I must reduce this portion of my talk down to the carnival's denouement: the explosion of affect from Chick that destroys the broken utopia of the Binewski Carnival Fabulon the moment he realizes his older brother's capacity for unchecked patriarchal capitalist exploitation.

It is with the destruction of the Carnival Fabulon that new possibilities for utopia without capitalist patriarchy at the center begin to emerge. In this timeline, taking place in contemporary 1980s Portland, Oly narrates the rest of the book to us, standing in for her daughter, Miranda, whom she gave up for adoption because Arty forced her to. The book is Oly's gift to her daughter, a revelation that "you aren't alone, that you are one of us" (Dunn 348). It is Miranda who initiates a relationship with the Dwarf in Room 21, whom she does not know is her mother, and Miranda who at the end of the novel is charged to "take care of Crystal Lil," the grandmother she never knew she had (348). The contemporary portions of Dunn's narrative orbit around Oly's watchful relationship over her daughter and her own mother, and Oly's secretive intervention in her daughter's life, which results in a complicated friendship with Miss Lick, the TV dinner magnate who seeks to free women from patriarchal control in ways not unlike Al breeding his own freak show or Arty's cult of limb-shedders. Oly's quest in this section of the novel is to prevent her daughter, who possesses near-perfect feminine beauty, save for a curling tail that juts out from the end of her spine, from accepting payment from Miss Lick to shed her tail and give up working at The Glass House, a strip club for dancers with "exotic specialties."

Although there is much feminist criticism of sex work industries like strip clubs that argue for their replication of patriarchal desires, performance scholars like Katherine Lieppe-Levinson argue that the narrative features of strip shows are often less objectifying than they may initially seem. Oly herself comes to this conclusion after watching her daughter perform, and then being pulled up onstage herself during amateur night, where she transforms a potentially shameful moment of public stripping into a moment of high-powered performance and willful self-actualization. In brokering a relationship with her sex worker daughter, Oly begins to reframe striptease not as a tool of the patriarchy, but as a tool of economic independence and resistance that allows Miranda to form a different relationship to embodied commodity, one in which the laborer is able to establish the terms of their own commodification and their own embodiment at once, in contrast to Miss Lick's factories, where the women she supposedly saves from objectification often go on to work due to the degrees of disfigurement they endure in shedding their normative beauty. In offering constrained choices like this, Miss Lick's family business, the corporation, operates too closely to patriarchal capital to enable true feminist liberation.

Only in the domestic space of the apartment building where Crystal Lil, Miranda, and Oly all live – together, but separately, does the novel seem to offer possibilities for a matrilineal utopia outside of the structures of patriarchal capital that govern the corporation or the carnival. José Esteban Muñoz has poetically called utopia 'a time and a place that is not yet here,' embedded with Bloch's 'principle of hope' (Muñoz 99). Muñoz's utopia resists capitalism, in which hope and the indeterminacy of what should be 'stand against capitalism's ever expanding and exhausting force field of how things 'are and will be'' (Muñoz 99). In Oly's wish for Miranda to reconnect with the grandmother she never knew and take care of Crystal Lil, I see Bloch's principle of hope. I see hope for connection and community between and among women



across generations. I see hope the remake families differently in ways that value maternity, rather than patriarchy, and in ways that are less directly tied to the wants of capital. Early on in the novel, Arty suggests that people come to the carnival in the hope that “they’ll win a prize, break the jackpot, meet a girl, hit a bull’s-eye in front of their buddies” but that hope is never available without risk of loss. And in *Geek Love*, it is only through the high-risk loss of the carnival and all it stands for that true hope emerges for a world that centers the feminine, a world which is not yet there.