Monstrous Form: The Ballerina and the Freak

by

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Middletown, Connecticut April, 2015
For Caroline with loving admiration.
Thank you for sharing your story and voice,
allowing me to give voice to others.
# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements........................................................................................................ ii

Introduction: Form / Deform — Dancer / Freak......................................................... 4

## Part I

### Chapter One: Specimen, Spectacle, Sylph: Histories of Ballet and Freak........... 17

**Performances**

i. A Brief History of the Freak Show................................................................. 20

ii. A Brief History of the Ballet........................................................................... 31

iii. Freak Show and Ballet, take two................................................................. 41

### Chapter Two: Reading the Monstrous Woman: Amalgamation, Mixture, Spectacle .... 43

**i. Theorizing the Monstrous Woman**................................................................. 46

**ii. The Bearded Lady: Gender as Mixture**...................................................... 49

**iii. The Ape-Faced Hairy Woman: Race and Gender**....................................... 52

**iv. The Ballerina: Reading Gender, Reading Race**........................................... 57

**v. The Fat Lady: Flesh, Sex, and Gender**......................................................... 67

**vi. Monstrous Form**.......................................................................................... 71

**vii. Images**......................................................................................................... 73

### Chapter Three: Deformed Form: Training the Monstrous Body......................... 78

**i. The Dancer’s Daily Routine: Training the Dancer—Machine**....................... 79

**ii. The Ballerina and the Fat Lady:**

Freaks as Trained/Weight as Training................................................................. 85

**iii. Developing Grotesqueness: Ballet as Monstrosity**....................................... 94

**iv. Training and Performance: The Bearded Lady’s Work**................................ 102

**v. Images**......................................................................................................... 108

From Theory to Performance..................................................................................... 110

## Part II

### Chapter Four: The Freak Show, the Ballet, and Modern Dance – Writing Embodied Experiences ................................................................. 112

**i. My Dancing and Body Narrative**................................................................. 113

**ii. LeeSaar and Gaga Inspiration**................................................................. 116

**iii. reconfigured/form (2014) (first semester choreography)**....................... 118

**iv. Marie Chouinard Performance and Inspiration**......................................... 129


**vi. Conclusion**.................................................................................................. 141

Works Cited........................................................................................................... 143
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Introduction

Form / Deform — Dancer / Freak

Growing up, I often felt like a freak. My hyper-flexible limbs set me apart from my peers in gym class, but they also increased my scores during gymnastics routines. My double-jointed elbows drew critical attention from ballet teachers, but also allowed my sister and me to perform duet tap dances, with arm tricks. I have devoted a lot of time to fixating on my body, specifically on my training or lack thereof. As a competitive gymnast and dancer, I spent hours in front of mirrors looking at my own body and at the bodies around me; I daydreamed about training my body into looking the way I liked and doing what I wanted it to do. My body was docile; and I could mold it into whatever form I wanted—or so I thought.

My definition of a trained body changed as I changed; when I did gymnastics, trained meant being thin and flexible; when I was walking down the street, trained meant being thin and attractive. In almost every area of my life, I imagined I could discipline my body to be thinner, no matter what size I was. Dance was especially difficult for me because it offered opportunities for me to scrutinize other girls’ bodies and to envy their small figures. As I grew older and developed curves, I found myself possessing a “feminine body” that I was not ready for; this “grotesque body” interfered with my gymnastic training and my vision of an ideal body. I became freakish. Dancers were supposed to be beautiful, fragile, long, and thin, not freakish. In my young mind, ballerinas were the opposite of freaks or people with disabilities;

1 Here, I draw on Foucault’s definition of a docile body as a body that “may be subjected, used, transformed, and improved” (Foucault, Michel. “Docile Bodies.” Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison. New York: Random House Incorporated. 1995, 136).
2 I am referencing literature on feminine bodies as grotesque, a topic I will explore in Chapter Two.
far from disabled, they were hyper-abled. I dreamed of being hyper-abled and having
total control over my body, leaving my freakishness behind. My body was de/forming
quickly and I could not keep up with it.

In an attempt to form and control my body, I spent years of living with
disordered eating, counting calories, and exercising several times a day. I suppose my
years of disordered eating were the first time I realized that my body was
simultaneously formed and deformed—though it had been that way all along. I lost a
lot of weight at that time and I was happy with the way I looked. But I often felt
dizzy, couldn’t run or dance; my fingernails broke easily and my hair fell out. My
disordered eating formed my body into a dancer’s body, but de/formed me when it
came to the physical act of dancing. I could not fathom how other dancers starved
themselves and performed; I could barely leave my bed. I lacked energy and
motivation, and faded away when I looked in the mirror; I had lost too much of my
self and I wanted it back. Again, I was a freak.

Years later, after I quit ballet and dance, I found Disability Studies and the
Wesleyan Dance Department. In modern dance, I could situate my body as both a
dancer and a freak. I had quirks, abilities, disabilities, and training that set me apart
from other dancers and people at school. As a choreographer, I focused my energy on
creating pieces at the intersection between disability and dance; I sought an embodied
language to explain the dichotomous life I lived between freak and dancer. I walk
with my feet turned out, one sign of my dance training. My flexibility is another sign

Hyper-abled is a term I have used while working on this body to encapsulate the ability (or at least
our labeling of ability as having surpassed natural prowess) of a trained body. Further I use hyper-abled
to explain the skill of a body formed and trained, a body that is purportedly (like the ballerina)
the opposite of dis-abled.
of my early training, but I also live in a body that was rejected from ballet, a sign of my failure at becoming a “true dancer” and “othering” me, no matter how hard I tried to conquer my body. This thesis is a convergence of the two forms I have embodied for much of my life: freak and dancer. It opens a door between them, suggesting that the two are not opposed and that one can perform both roles as I have. This research has also offered me a way to think critically about moments in my life when I was “enfreaked” (or so I thought) and to understand the identity categories that I do and do not occupy.

**Literatures of Form**

I started this research as my final paper for Professor Weiss’ “Politics of the Body” course, which I took fall semester of my junior year at Wesleyan University. During the first iteration of this process, I wanted to explore the ways in which ballet was disabling and a kind of freak show. I used freak show literature to intervene in ballet scholarship, but the work ended there—it did not lead me back to reflect on the freak show. This initial work led me to more questions. I knew that the project was not finished and that the bodies of the ballerina and the freak would become the inspiration for my thesis. Since then, this work has evolved in many ways. Instead of just thinking about ballet as disabling, I ask my readers to join me in thinking about bodies, form, deformity, ability, gender, and race as they come together on these two bodies.

For this research, I have drawn on a variety of different bodies of literature. First, my work is situated within freak show scholarship, drawn largely from the work of Robert Bogdan, Rachel Adams, and Rosemarie Garland Thomson. Their
definitions of freak vary respectively from “a social construction”⁴ to “a performative identity”⁵ to “products of perception;”⁶ I employ all of these definitions as I discuss freaks in my thesis. In his work *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit*, Bogdan explores the cultural context of the freak shows that existed in the United States from 1840-1940. In *Sideshow U.S.A.*, Adams uses Bogdan’s work and expands freak show literature by reading the grotesque body, considering the freak show post World War II, and by looking at the freak show’s impact on literature, art, and culture of its era. She thinks critically about the freak’s body as a reflection of cultural anxieties. Garland Thomson, in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body, Extraordinary Bodies*, and other literature about the freak show, look at the extraordinary body in close relation to the formation of the normate.⁷ Garland Thomson explores the idea of disability being imposed on a body, rather than inherent.⁸ She also uses David Hevey’s term “enfreakment”⁹ to explain the creation of freak performances. For Garland Thomson, enfreakment is becoming a freak; it occurs when “the body envelops and obliterates the freak’s potential humanity.”¹⁰

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⁷ Garland Thomson defines normate as “the constructed identity of those who, by the way of bodily configurations and cultural capital they assume, can step into a position of authority and wield the power it grants them” (Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 8).
⁸ Ibid., 6.
⁹ Ibid., 19.
¹⁰ Ibid., 59.
These are texts to which I returned throughout my research; they are foundational texts. Still, much of the work surrounding freak show and disability up until this point has asked questions about agency, exploitation, and whether the freak show served as a site of abuse, or contrarily, empowerment. While these are vital questions, the question of the form of the bodies in the freak show has been left untouched. We do not have a way to understand the work that goes into forming, or training, freakish bodies. Instead, we tend to conceptualize freaks as performers who capitalized on a natural disability to turn it into spectacle or entertainment. However, using the ballet as a juxtaposition through which to view the freak show requires us to put aside questions of agency and disability for a moment and, instead, to think critically about training and form. How did freak show performers train their bodies to fit ideals of freakishness? My contribution to this scholarship is the suggestion that freakery is a trained category of bodily form.

My thesis also draws on dance scholarship, especially Jennifer Homans’ *Apollo’s Angels: A History of Ballet* (2010) and Susan Foster’s *Reading Dancing: Bodies and Subjects in Contemporary American Dance* (1986). Homans’ text has been called “the only truly definitive history of…ballet”¹¹—indeed, specific and thorough work on ballet’s history was not compiled in one large location until Homans’ publication. Dance scholarship highlights questions of training, embodiment, form, and deformity. I have drawn on this work to create a method of reading that allows me to ask new questions about the ways freak show performers train and form their bodies. However, I also read ballet performances through insights

generated in my analysis of the freak show. Specifically, as I will argue in Chapter Two, drawing on the freak show, I reread gender and race in the ballet, asking new questions about the sexuality and normativity of gender in classical ballet performances.

Because my project explores modes of embodiment with a particular focus on gender, I have also drawn on a range of feminist theorists. Judith Butler’s conception of gender performativity, alongside Mary Russo’s, Barbara Creed’s, and Margrit Shildrick’s theorizations of the monstrous feminine, have helped me explore the possibilities and mechanisms of performance, norms, and training in regards to gender, particularly femininity. Ultimately, while I focus my thesis on feminine forms in the ballet and the freak show, feminist theory assists me in suggesting that technique is something we all enact.¹²

The last field within which I must situate my thesis is disability studies. An understanding of Garland Thomson’s work on disability, bodies, and the freak show and Lennard Davis’ work on the cultural constructions of disability have been essential to my own readings of the body, norms, and power. Although I have departed from an initial focus on dis/ability to thinking more about de/formity, I believe that, ultimately, this thesis contributes to disability studies by exploring the possibilities of training disability, further the notion that disability is a social construction.¹³

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¹² This work focuses specifically on performances of femininity and female freaks. In doing so, I am not reifying biological or scientific definitions of woman, but rather intend to theorize the performance of womanhood and femininity.

The Freak Show and the Ballet

At first glance, the ballet and the freak show appear quite distinct. The ballet is a form of high art, the freak show is low art. Women in the ballet are seen as angelic and sylph-like; women in the freak show are monstrous and masculinized. Ballerinas are agents of their own bodies; freaks are objects or accidents. Ballerinas are trained, able, even hyper-able, while freaks are natural, disabled, fundamentally different. Audiences of the ballet are educated and view the performances with awe; mass audiences of the freak show ogle the performers. Yet, the ballerina and the freak are in opposition not only to each other, but also to the category in between both: the normate. Rosemarie Garland Thomson defines the normate as “the social figure through which people can represent themselves as definitive human beings. Normate, then, is the constructed identity of those who, by the way of bodily configurations and cultural capital they assume, can step into a position of authority and wield the power it grants them.”  

The ballerina’s angelic quality and the freak’s monstrosity rely, for their definitional coherence, on their relation to the normate. In order to tease apart these multiple relations, my thesis relies on a method of juxtaposition—reading the ballerina and the freak against and with each other. The early American freak show and the ballet are two performances that have no before been compared. My research has juxtaposed the two, finding oppositions and overlap in gender, race, mixture, technique, and training that lead me to the conceptual questions that guide my research: If a freak is someone who capitalizes on bodily otherness and crafts a technical performance around a physical body, then is the

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14 Garland Thomson, Extraordinary Bodies, 8.
ballerina another version of the freak? How do histories of gender, race, and pathology come together to create categories of freakishness? Why has the ballet been elevated and viewed as “high art,” while the freak show is denigrated to “low art”? In this way, my thesis both reveals similarities between the two performances, while also acknowledging their differences.

In her essay “Intolerable Ambiguity,” Elizabeth Grosz defines her “freak” as “neither unusually gifted nor unusually disadvantaged. He or she is not an object of simple admiration or pity, but is a being who is considered simultaneously and compulsively fascinating and repulsive, enticing and sickening.”15 This definition is useful for my own conception of freak as monstrous—as mixing and combining expressions of gender, race, and sexuality on the body. Further, in Sideshow USA, Rachel Adams argues that “freak is not an inherent quality but an identity realized through gesture, costume, and staging.”16 Following Judith Butler’s description of gendered performance, freak might also be conceived as “an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts.”17 My concept of freak, then, combines amalgamation or mixture with technique and form. If freaks are “neither unusually gifted nor unusually disadvantaged,” this is because they are trained, similarly to the ballerina, to perform enfreakment with their bodies.18 Any corporeal difference that they may possess does not constitute the entirety of their performances; freaks do much more than capitalize on deformity, as they must undergo training to fit within the category “freak.”

16 Adams, Sideshow USA., 6.
Not anyone can be a freak, just as not anyone can be a ballerina. Or perhaps, not anyone can be born a freak or a ballerina. Alongside Garland Thomson, I seek to challenge “entrenched assumptions that “able-bodiedness” and its conceptual opposite, “disability,” as self-evident physical conditions by instead highlighting the intentional performances of both the freak performer and the ballerina. Asserting that a “freak” is someone with a physical disability, “reduce[s] the complex person to a single attribute” and bolsters the assumption that any identity that is non-normative is also innate. If we, instead, understand these identity categories as trained, how does this affect our notions about the training of normate bodies? My ultimate point is that de-naturalizing the freak and the ballerina encourages us to understand all bodies as non-natural, and to confront the ways conforming to any given category or identity requires intensive training and work.

Freak is a form; it is not inherently deformed, disabled, or formless. Recognizing types and ideals within which we expect certain bodies to conform is a crucial part of my ultimate assertion that we all enact trained performances. My own condemnation of myself as a freak when I was young was a direct result of my body’s nonconformity to an ideal which I longed for; I deemed myself freakish. The freak’s body and her training are obscured when we think only about disability, while the ballerina’s de/formity is obscured when we focus only on her form and technique. Yet, as I will show, both the ballerina and the freak create legible performances by

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21 When I say “work” here I mean both the physical actions to maintain a “normal” body and the scholarly work about normalcy.
22 I am interested in thinking of disability as a trained performance, rather than an inherent bodily category. I do so, however, through using form and deformity to be specific about corporeality rather than using disability as an overarching term for these bodies.
conforming to specific forms through technique, and both perform these monstrous forms in front of an audience.

Imagining freak as the opposite of normate helps us forget that freaks, too, must conform to ideals, that freak is an identity category. Judith Butler defines identity categories as regulatory regimes that function through “normalizing categories of oppressive structures.”

The performativity of gendered identities means that “to say that I ‘play’ at being [a lesbian] is not to say that I am not one ‘really,’ rather, how and where I play at being one is the way in which that ‘being’ gets established, instituted, circulated, and confirmed.” Following Butler, I intend to ask just that: how does ‘being’ a freak or a ballerina become “established, instituted, circulated, and confirmed?” The answer to this question is located on the bodies and in the training of the people who come to be recognized as freak and ballerina.

**Chapter Outline**

Chapter One gives a brief history of the early American freak show (1840-1940) and the ballet (16th century-present). In this chapter, I look specifically at the class of these divergent audiences and explore the context and setting of each performance. The specific opposition this chapter explores is “high art” versus “low art,” an opposition I situate within a history of entertainment and leisure in the United State. My method in this first chapter is to be attentive to the histories of these performances: I aim to give readers a sense of these different performance locations. By juxtaposing the freak show and the ballet as performances—in terms of their audience, the space, the cost of attending the performance, and their cultural

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24 Ibid., 311.
contexts—I foreground the relations between bodily ability, display, form, and spectacle in each, paying careful attention to the distinct role that gaze plays.

Chapter Two develops a reading of the monstrous female form as a site of mixture and amalgamation. Through the visual analysis of images of female freak performers—specifically the Bearded Lady, the Ape-Faced Hairy Woman, and the Fat Lady—I explore the way markers of gender, race, and sexuality appear on the body, and argue that it is through the performed mixture of these markers that these bodies become freak. The reading of the freak performer allows me to re-envision the ballerina’s body; drawing on ideas of spectacle and mixture, I highlight the monstrous femininity of the ballerina. Throughout the chapter, I pay close attention to visual markers and ways to read bodies—grounding this method in histories of sexology and in a performance studies approaches to spectacle.

Chapter Three takes up the training and technique that produce the monstrous forms of both freak performers and ballerina. I begin by drawing on my own dance experiences and an interview with dancer Caroline Shadle\textsuperscript{25} in order to give a glimpse into the training typical of a ballerina. This exploration helps me generate the concept of “deformed form” that the ballerina trains her body into, and inhabits. Considering embodiment as a process, this chapter reconsiders “disability” by thinking about training as a disabling practice. Building on this analysis, I turn to the freak performers in order to explore the forms of training and technique that produce those bodies and performances. This juxtaposition allows me to consider the roles training and technique play in producing monstrosity as a deformed form.

\textsuperscript{25} Caroline Shadle is a dancer, former ballerina, and performer in my choreography that accompanies this thesis.
Chapter Four turns to the choreography that accompanies this thesis. In this chapter, I focus on the embodied experiences that guided my theoretical work in the preceding chapters. I discuss the choreography process and performances of two dance iterations of the Dance portion of this thesis. I speak to my own embodied experience and include my dancers’ voices and reflections about my two semesters of choreography. I include influential modern dance works, which inspired my own choreography. My own training is in modern dance and, thus, I use it to further my understanding of my own body as trained. I have included a link to my performance.\(^\text{26}\)

Throughout my thesis, I combine methods, sources, and literatures, juxtaposing and reading one against the other, in order to shed new light on questions of form, deformity, spectacle, art, and performance. Using this interdisciplinary approach, I point to an absence in the record—a gap in what we think we know about bodies and norms. Juxtaposition helps me ask questions about what is missing from these histories and our theories—it is not so much that freak show and the ballet are the same, but rather that close attention to one might reveal gaps and absences in our understanding of the other. Each of my chapters juxtaposes freak show and ballet in order to highlight different aspects of these forms: the role of spectacle and gaze, the play of gender and racial mixture, and the function of technique and training. Rachel Rutherford, a former soloist with the New York City ballet said to me in a phone conversation, “As a ballet dancer, I feel like we regard ourselves as a bit freakish -

\(^{26}\)https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AhDBSiOTvcE (reconfigured//form – 2014). See also, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1c_qkS8jOw (form\[all\] training – 2015) and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1h9hnfQXSbQ
emotionally and physically and everything.\textsuperscript{27} The thesis departs from this perspective—one that I share—in order to construct an analysis of monstrous form that can help us ask new questions about ability, disability, bodily norms, gender, race, and power.

\textsuperscript{27}Rachel Rutherford, Interview by author, phone conversation recording, Middletown, CT, January 2015.
Chapter One

Specimen, Spectacle, Sylph: Histories of Ballet and Freak Performances

The histories of the ballet and the early American freak show are not histories that intertwine at first suggestion. In fact, the two performances are opposed in many ways. The ballet provides an audience with representations of angels, fairies, and sylphs, while the freak show is most commonly associated with portrayals of monsters and demons: the lowest members of society. The ballet is regarded as a “high art,” the freak show a “low art,” if even termed art at all. I want to call particular attention to this dichotomy to which we culturally subscribe and think critically about what high art versus low art means. Although the histories of these art forms are distinct, reading the performances together draws our attention to perhaps surprising similarities, or parallels. One of the major parallels between the ballet and the freak show is the way both performances “choreograph human variation into a spectacle of bodily otherness”; both performances are about spectacle and display of difference. In this chapter, I will recount the separate histories of freak shows and ballet, paying careful attention to audience, context, and performance. Throughout, I will call particular attention to moments where aspects of the ballet transform what we might ask about the freak show, and vice versa.

1 The Oxford English Dictionary defines sylph as “one of a race of beings or spirits supposed to inhabit the air” and “applied to a graceful woman or girl; usually with implication of slender figure and light airy movement.” I use the term sylph throughout this thesis to talk about the ballerina as sylph is a role she is commonly expected to enact.

2 Throughout this chapter I use the words freak show and sideshow in reference to “American freak shows [which were] popular social rituals that constructed and disseminated a figure who crucial cultural work was to exhibit to the American masses what they imagined themselves not to be.” However, their work was not this simple. While they did present oddities, the early American Freak Show “choreographed human variation into a spectacle of bodily otherness.” (Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 16, 17).
The first point of entry is that both are forms of American entertainment, linked to changing histories of leisure in the United States. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, what historian Kathy Peiss terms “the intensive commercialization of leisure” made new forms of entertainment popular and accessible to both upper and working class America. In *Cheap Amusements*, Kathy Peiss writes “leisure has come to be perceived as a realm of autonomy and choice, a sphere of life separate from the obligations of the workplace.” The sideshow was widely promoted and popular during a time when people were beginning to separate work and free time spatially and temporally. E.P. Thompson and Kathy Peiss both argue that

The development of wage labor, imposition of time disciplined by employers, and rationalization of the work process resulted in a new sense of the rhythms of time and cognitively surrendered “work” from “life”… Working-class leisure thus offered a refuge from the dominant value system of competitive individualism…

As we will see, working class leisure is imperative to the success of the freak show as the performance depended on entertaining working class citizens across America in a setting where individuals could be anonymous. In contrast, the ballet has, from its inception, carried with it connotations of high art; its performance for wealthy or even ruling classes, and it gained popularity in the United States only after World War II.

Wealth and class associations shift the audience’s perception of the art as well. In the ballet, patrons sit on velvet seats in performance venues; at the freak show, people sit on benches in the mud. Yet, the idea of leisure as a refuge from

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4 Ibid.
competitive individualism becomes apparent in the spatial layout of both the freak show and the ballet. The audience, in both cases, sits or stands separated from the performers by a stage. On stage, individuals are highlighted through lights, costumes, and gaze, but offstage, the audience is grouped together. They are anonymous both to one another and to the performers through technological advancements such as control over lighting (above the audience).⁵

A second point of entry is the audience’s gaze, as both the freak show and the ballet are spectacles of bodily difference. At the freak show, “Americans gathered at this most democratizing institution to gaze raptly at the ineffable other who was both the focus and the creation of the freak show’s hyperbolic conventions of display.”⁶

Something similar may be said about the ballet after World War II. Americans gathered to gaze at ineffable others (ballerinas) whose technical training, skill, and discipline were the creation of the ballet’s hyperbolic conventions of display. There are parallels in display and difference, yet the two forms elicit specific gazes. The freak show audience gawks, moves around the object, and is rendered superior in their ability to scrutinize the specimens on stage; whereas, the ballet audience sits in awe, polite and silent, removed from the performers, and subject to the illusion that the proscenium creates.

With this in mind, I turn now to histories of the freak show and the ballet. While I will explore each art form separately, I ask the reader to keep in mind these

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⁵ This technology is particular to the ballet, though the circus and some freak shows adopted this technique.
juxtapositions, parallels, and divergences in terms of their histories, the kinds of gaze of the audiences, the settings of the performances, and the space and the format of the stage.

**A Brief History of the Freak Show**

“All for the insignificant sum of one dime, two nickels, ten coppers, one tenth of a dollar—the price of a shave or a hair ribbon...The greatest, most astounding aggregation of marvels and monstrosities gathered together in one edifice...[a] feat for the eye and mind. A refined exhibition for cultured ladies and gentlemen. No waiting. No delays. Step up, ladies and gentlemen, and avoid the rush!”

During the 19th and 20th century, audiences all over the world paid money to see “human oddities” performed live on stage. Robert Bogdan traces the birth of this tradition of displaying “human curiosities” to a tradition of displaying “animal curiosities,” which was popular in the 18th and 19th centuries. Scientists and general audiences alike were stumped by these human curiosities, which they could not categorize. The simultaneity of traditions of displaying animals and displaying anomalous bodies asked audiences to consider these human bodies as somehow distanced from humanity and as needing to be caged or at least separated. Further, displaying unusual bodies fascinated Victorian audiences because *lusus naturae* or freaks of nature, which were once believed to be “evil omens, or the workings of witchcraft, or a punishment for a parental transgression” were beginning to be viewed as “part of God’s great order of creatures and subject to scientific study and classification, as were all creatures.”

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8 Bogdan, 70.
9 Ibid., 26.
10 Here I reference P.T. Barnum’s well-known exhibit “What Is It?” “advertised as a missing link between primitive humanity and the orangutan” (Adams, 36).
11 Bogdan, 27.
important spaces for scientists to affirm their status as “experts in curiosity
controversies,” as they, too, visited the abnormal bodies and speculated on the
“origins of these creatures.” The displays that popped up in informal settings such
as bars and taverns, which preceded the organized freak show, are most directly
related to the “English Model” of displaying anomalous bodies. All across the
world, Enlightenment thinking elevated the scientific study of bodies. People began
to scrutinize corporeality. As legislation that had previously banned circuses and
sideshow changed, publicity, demand for, and popularity of these traveling
spectacles expanded.

Informal displays began to evolve into more formal museums across
American cities in the 1820s and 30s. The owners of these museums were often
“amateur scientists.” The museums featured “a hodgepodge of exhibits including
paintings, stuffed animals, live animals, wax figures, mechanical devices, light
shows…and human curiosities.” Again, the freak’s body is situated among objects,
animal and otherwise. P.T. Barnum is credited with initiating a lasting tradition of
freak shows in America as he founded the American Museum. Barnum charged
twenty-five cents for audiences to see human curiosities that would cause them to
gasp and stare. The dime museums, which were inspired by Barnum’s American
Museum, cost ten cents for entrance fee (hence their name) and began appearing
across the country at the same time as an influx of European immigrants. The

12 Ibid.
13 Ibid., 25. The English Model is the way human bodies were being displayed as curiosities in England
at this time as well.
14 Ibid., 78.
15 Ibid., 29.
16 Ibid.
17 It is interesting that Barnum adopted “museum,” for his display as museum is a word associated with
high art, culture, and scholarship (i.e. Natural History museums and art museums).
museums were typically located in big cities; as Bogdan notes, “New York City was the dime museum capital.” Dime museums were cheap and appealed to many different populations; immigrants, scientists, working class citizens, and others. Most historians situate the origins of the freak show in these dime museums, which declined in popularity because of the variety of other mass entertainment forms that proliferated in 20th century America, just as the freak show took off.

Freak shows were cheap entertainment for the masses; elements of the show were highly performative in order to garner attention and create spectacle. The quotation, which opens this section, was typical of the patter boasted by showmen to attract audiences. This advertisement of the freak show is important in understanding the type of performance that characterized sideshows. The cost of entrance is an “insignificant sum…the price of a shave or a hair ribbon,” so it is accessible to working class consumers looking for entertainment. This value is then immediately imposed on the performers, “the greatest, most astounding aggregation of marvels and monstrosities” who are “a feat for the eye and mind.” Interestingly, the exhibition is “refined for cultured ladies and gentlemen.” This phrasing is careful to distance the audience from the performers before they even set foot into the performance realm. This showman encourages audience members to “step up” (which, as we will see, is unlike the formal setting of the ballet where people are asked to sit down and wait patiently in lines). This language lends a sense of superiority to the audience, inviting them to approach, while objectifying the performers. Rachel Adams comments, “the Barnumesque promise of more for your money was realized structurally in the freak

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18 Bogdan, 25.
show, or the ten-in-one, where an entire collection of human oddities could be viewed for one price.”

All of these advertising mechanisms demote the performers; they are not “brilliant or astonishing” like the ballerina, but cheap feasts for the eyes.

Rural areas benefited from “a more for your money” traveling attraction like the freak show. Though they did not have dime museums, these areas could count on the traveling circuses and freak shows making their rounds, entertaining beyond America’s metropolises. “The scope of circuses exploded, its tents swelling to accommodate, in the big top of the larger shows, twelve thousand people…the circus was the major organization of popular amusement for rural Americans.”

Rachel Adams contextualizes the freak show as a part of “broader development of mass entertainment that included amusement parks, circuses, dime museums, and vaudeville. Bogdan explains that

The forms of entertainment [the freak show in my case] that before had used the museums as a façade no longer needed such protection…as circuses, street fairs, world’s fairs, carnivals, and urban amusement parks, all of which exhibited freaks began to collect the dimes to which museum proprietors had once enjoyed almost exclusive claims, museums evolved—some into vaudeville house, others into theaters.

Further Adams historicizes the freak show’s popularity as,

The emergence of an amusement industry in the United States was enabled by an expanding middle class that was increasingly concentrated in urban centers, enjoying shorter workweeks and more disposable income, and by technological innovations such as electricity and the steam engine. These developments were accompanied by an ideological shift in American attitudes towards leisure, which came to be seen as a necessary and salutary counterpart to the work ethic.
Garland Thomson argues that the rise and popularity of the freak show from 1840-1940 (and beyond) was due to “free enterprise and the rise of a democratized and fluid middle class,” which worked to support and promote the freak show as a kind of affordable and accessible performance industry. P.T. Barnum’s career centered on pleasing this “democratized and fluid middle class” and we may understand him as the father of American freak show and circus culture. Later in his life, he worked together with James Bailey to take a “collection of performing humans and animals on the road as part of the largest circus ever to tour the United States.” The Barnum and Bailey Circus exists today, as the “greatest show on earth,” and while many of the acts that typified the freak show have been discontinued, the legacy persists. The circus displays clowns, animals, and trapeze artists among each other, continuing to blur lines between disability, science, art, and training.

Officially institutionalizing freak shows was an important step in American history as

The great public institutions erected in America during the nineteenth century were conceived as monuments to the accomplishments and potential of a nation poised to become a global power. Defining themselves against the disorderly clutter of popular entertainment, institutions such as museums, parks, and zoos sought to enlighten their visitors through the strict organization of space and regulation of behavior.

From their birth, freak shows were created as an endeavor to build and strengthen a national identity as patriarchal and heteronormative and relied on science to delineate these categories.

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24 I use this title to draw a comparison between P.T. Barnum and George Balanchine.
25 Bogdan, 40.
26 Ibid., 26.
Indeed, Rachel Adams credits the birth of the freak show with “a conjunction between scientific investigation and mass entertainment.” Adams continues, “exact management of space and time, and division and specialization of professional expertise” characterized middle class culture. Here, again, the idea of spatial and temporally dividing space is connected with the growing desire for leisure and entertainment for the middle class. Yet central to the freak show is its “tradition of publicly displaying and reading extraordinary bodies,” capitalizing on oddity and curiosity, making spectacles and specimens out of bodies. Audience members could count on seeing “an astonishing array of corporeal wonders, from wild men of Borneo to fat ladies, living skeletons, Fiji princes, albinos, bearded women, Siamese twins, tattooed Circassians, armless and legless wonders, Chinese giants, cannibals, midget triplets, hermaphrodites, spotted boys, and much more.” These bodies surprised, shocked, scared, and intrigued audience members, challenging culturally understood sites of gender, race, human, animal, and other categorizations upon which stable identity is based. Both the pathologization of these bodies and the intentional framing of a freak subject in reference to a normate subject make performers legible as oddities.

27 Adams, 27.
28 Ibid.
31 It is important to note that the freak show invited a gawking, white, patriarchal, heteronormative gaze because those were the only categories excluded from enfreakment, as they maintained a personality beyond their corporeality.
From Specimen to Spectacle

All of these rules surrounding display evolve from a historical shift in understanding monsters and extraordinary bodies. While extraordinary bodies have always been a part of our history and “seem to compel explanation, inspire representation, and incite regulation,”32 in the modern era, “the prodigious monster transforms into the pathological terata; what was once sought after as revelation becomes pursued as entertainment; what aroused awe now inspires horror; what was taken as a portent shifts to a site of progress. In brief, wonder becomes error.”33 Teratology, or the study of abnormalities, is born out of a “disenchantment of the world”34 that Enlightenment thought produces. The word freak follows this same pathway; in 1637 “freak” enters the English language through Milton’s Lycidas, meaning “a fleck of color.”35 Roughly two hundred years later, in 1847, “the word become[s] synonymous with human corporal anomaly.”36 This transition changes these bodies from naturally deviant and, therefore, outcast to “narratives of error,”37 fascinating nonetheless, which require medical attention and correction.

Rachel Adams acknowledges the tensions that arose as the freak show occupied a liminal space between education and entertainment;

The history of the freak show’s efflorescence in the second half of the nineteenth century is thus punctuated by a contentious

33 Ibid., 3.
36 Ibid., 4.
dialogue between the lofty discourses of the museum and the university and the promotional hype of the commercial entrepreneur. Accredited scholars attempted to distance themselves from the entertainment industry as they were pushed into competition for its audiences, while showmen ridiculed the experts’ knowledge, yet sought legitimacy by appropriating the conventions and rhetoric of the life sciences.  

Bodies that were specimen become spectacle and in many cases vice versa. These are the bodies that then became a touring troupe of performers, enchanting audiences with oddity. The relationship between science and the freak show, as discussed above, influenced a classification of bodies that we still use today.

The history of sexology helps us understand the twinning of bodies as spectacle and specimen. Reaching its pinnacle in the late 19th century, but with origins much earlier, sexological logic proposed that signs of difference could be located on the body and that such visible markers would explain (and justify) colonialism, imperialism, and other racial, gendered, and ability based hierarchies. Doctors, scientists, and psychologists viewed deviant bodies “on stage,” or in the anatomical theater. Sartje Baartman (also referred to as Venus Hottentot) is an early icon of this search for and evidence of physicality corresponding with racialized inferiority. Garland Thomson calls attention to Sartje Baartman’s story as one that parallels the life of the freak and the life of a woman. She also asks us to consider both Saartje

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38 Adams, 27.
39 I say onstage here to reference the intentional hiding of “deformed” bodies that also existed but were not seen during this era. i.e. Ugly Laws. I reference the work of Susan Schweik. See: Schweik, Susan M. The ugly laws: Disability in public. (New York: NYU Press, 2009).
40 Sartjie Baartman “billed as ‘The Hottentot Venus’...instructed her audience how appropriate female sexuality should appear.” (Garland Thomson, Extraordinary Bodies, 71). Her body was speculated widely by audiences and scientists alike; though she maintained a certain privacy, refusing to be shown naked. Saartjie Baartman died in 1815 and her body was dissected and put on display. Many of our associations about the black female body stem from Sartjie’s large buttocks; a source of terror and awe and a physical manifestation (or so the sexologists thought) of her gendered and racialized inferiority. See more Garland Thomson, “The Cultural Work of American Freak Shows, 1835-1940.”
Baartman and Julia Pastrana’s (a woman, who I will discuss in Chapter Two) stories as “parodic beauty pageants” as these women defined how femininity should not be displayed, thus creating norms of Victorian Femininity.\(^{41}\) However, I want to draw attention to the ways Saartjie Baartman’s purportedly extraordinary body became a specimen that demanded a different kind of gaze once she became a medical subject. The critical gaze came not only from doctors, but also from the general public. Her body became property of the public, for the good of science, and she was viewed as an animal, a subhuman, perhaps animal. Later sexologists continued this logic.

Havelock Ellis, a sexologist of this era who published *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, believed that an “‘invert’ might be visually distinguishable from the ‘normal’ body through anatomical markers, just as differences between the sexes had traditionally been mapped upon the body.”\(^{42}\) In many ways, the freak show’s history shows a merging of science, spectacle, and specimen.

**Attending the Freak Show**

What could one expect when attending the freak show? The performance venue was regulated spatially and temporally, in accordance with the categorization of life within the show. Freak shows were often traveling and took place outdoors, under tents, or in makeshift performance spaces. If there was not space in cities, people took trains to visit the shows just outside. At the venue, the freak’s body is physically separated from the audiences’ body by some sort of stage or “elevated

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As Adams writes, “a confluence of visual, auditory, and tactile sensations sets the stage for the audience’s experience of the prodigious body. Sweltering heat, the smells of popcorn and animal dung, abusive exchanges between carnies, freaks, and customers—these are the freak show’s Proustian mnemonics.” This environment is in large part what classifies the freak show as “low art” because it is not majestic, but rather ordinary – extra-ordinary for that matter. The freak show is the child of the carnival; it is dirty, shocking, and rowdy. Performers are spatially distanced from audience members, but in this setting it is for the sake of preserving the audience member’s own hygiene and normalcy. 

Lighting and sets played a relatively small role in the freak show, but illusion played a large role. The illusions all centered around the bodies on the stage and the actions they took on. For example, conjoined twins often danced with two men, a performance that challenged notions of singularity, raised the specter of sex between more than two people, and asked audience members to create norms in order for them to be broken. Audience members could see each other and the freaks throughout the performances. Shouting, laughing, and chatter were common during the shows. Audiences announced what they did and did not believe. For example, audience members often condemned the Bearded Lady for being men dressed up as women, as imposters and not the true freaks the audience paid to see. Spectators were in direct communication with the freaks and the showmen, though the freaks during these

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43 Adams, 12.
44 Ibid., 12.
shows did not yet talk back.\textsuperscript{46} Announcements prior to the performance also might include the command: ‘stand back ladies and gentlemen, what you are about to see will shock and amaze you.’\textsuperscript{47} And that is just what the freak show did; it shocked and amazed audiences and, at the same time, enforced bodily norms by displaying their inverse. The audiences of the freak show were very participatory and powerful due to the spatial arrangement of the performance and the type of display. They were able to walk through the exhibits and could decide how long to spend on any given freak.

Many have considered the ways the freak show persists in the entertainment industry today. Though the dime museums and some traveling sideshows have vanished, the freak show continues to inform literature, performances, and spectacle all throughout the world. People attend circuses and viewers tune into American Horror Story: Freak Show and other forms of media that are contingent on the type of spectacle the freak show initiated. Enfreaked performances continue to exist in society and entertainment today within and beyond the traveling tents of circuses, sideshows, and the like. But the trekking through the mud to see the most astonishing oddity, the booming voice of the showman—these traditions have been obscured. In the faint background of our continued enfreaked traditions, we hear the showman still: “Step up, ladies and gentlemen, and avoid the rush!”\textsuperscript{48}


\textsuperscript{47} Adams, 13.

\textsuperscript{48} Isman, Felix. \textit{Weber and Fields}. (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1924), 79.
A Brief History of the Ballet:

“Good evening ladies and gentlemen and welcome to this evening’s performance. As a courtesy to those around you, please turn off all cell phones and pagers…As a reminder, the use of recording devices is not permitted.”

Though we know that today many young girls dream of pointe shoes and of becoming professional ballerinas, the art mostly featured men at its beginning. In order to understand where ballet came from and thus from where our obsession with a highly aestheticized ideal form derives, we must look at the history of ballet and particularly the history of ballet in the United States. The history that I will provide in this section is by no means exhaustive, but instead works to generate some points of connection and contrast with the history of the freak show.

Ballet’s history begins in France where the technique “evolved from European court life and was influenced by the ideas and theories of the educated classes.” The birth of ballet resulted from a marriage between an Italian woman, Catherine de Medici and the French King, Henri II, in 1533. In order to compete with the “lavishness” of Italian culture, and thus propagate French culture, the French adopted the ballet. From its conception, ballet drew “on a deep tradition of Italian Renaissance thought and princely patronage of the arts” that “thought of spectacle as a way to soothe passions and calm sectarian violence.” Further, ballet and art more generally were associated with idealism since it was widely believed that “music and

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49 Rachel Rutherford, email message to author, March 28, 2015.
51 Homans, 3.
52 Ibid., 4.
53 Ibid., 5.
art could summon men to their highest capacities and goals.”\textsuperscript{54} The ballet’s focus on the body changed the notion of the “body…as pulling man down, sacrificing his higher spiritual powers to material needs” to the idea that “if [man] danced…man might break some of these earthly ties and raise himself up, closer to the angels.”\textsuperscript{55} In a way, the concept of the ballet as uplifting man from earthly to angelic inversely parallels the shift from specimen to spectacle in the freak show. Ballet’s conception of the body is rooted in a religious transcendence of the earth. The holiness of the art coincides with its relation to the ruling classes, who were already perceived as closer to God than the lowly common people. Indeed, some ballets told stories of the Kings they performed in front of to affirm their status and power.

During ballet’s infancy men were responsible for all of the choreography,\textsuperscript{56} and dancing. Contemporary features of the ballet, such as the elevated stage, costuming, and lighting were nowhere to be found in early ballet. Louis XIV, the Sun King, is credited with “institutionalizing the quest for perfection in dancing” when he established the Academy of Dance, though the performances still occurred in the court during this time.\textsuperscript{57} This was the first time that ballet was viewed as a profession. Louis XIV “commissioned Pierre Beauchamp to collect, organize, and devise a notation system for existing dance steps” that eventually became the widely understood basis of ballet.\textsuperscript{58} It wasn’t until 1713 that technical ballet training was

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 6.
\textsuperscript{56} Men are still responsible for most choreographing that occurs. (Adair, 84).
\textsuperscript{58} Foster, Reading Dancing, Notes, n.30, 253.
formalized by the creation of a school of dance at the Paris Opera.\textsuperscript{59} Many say that the form we now associate with ballet is an evolution and continuation of the “sense of beauty and the ideal human form evident in classical sculpture of the Greeks and Romans.”\textsuperscript{60} The dancing man was closer to God and, therefore, closer to perfection. Early ballets recounted Greek and Roman mythology and ballet’s emphasis on bodily form, geometry, and space mimicked the sculptor’s attention to the body. The ballet was and is about transcendence; man transgresses his body, the audience is transcended beyond their seats, understanding of reality, and perhaps humanity, as the art is a form of the Gods. This is, again, a stark contrast with the body of a freak as lowly and animalistic and the freak show as a low art. Yet we see that both arts revolve around the classification of the body marked as other than normate.

By the time the ballet arrived in America in 1933, women had already begun to be associated with the art. Homans reminds us that in America, ballet was a “foreign art.”\textsuperscript{61} This is significant because the freak show is remembered as an icon of early 20\textsuperscript{th} century America; long lines, cheap tickets, and bodily spectacles were as American as it came. The ballet, however, was imported from Europe and was quite unsuccessful upon its initial introduction to America. Although the ballet seems related other performances of the era, such as vaudeville—both performances were “spectacle of beautiful girls,”\textsuperscript{62} as Homans writes—it did not achieve vaudeville’s

\textsuperscript{59} Adair, 83.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{61} Homans, 449.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid.
mass popularity. Homans goes as far as to suggest that “the American state, by contrast, had been founded to free its citizens from overbearing centralized power and to liberate them from the ceremonial pomp that has corrupted European political life.” However we read this history of America, the commercialization of leisure and spread of middle-class entertainment forms did not embrace the ballet. Meanwhile, the freak show attracted audience members all across America.

George Balanchine is often called the father of the American Ballet. George Balanchine, born in St. Petersburg, Russia, founded the New York City Ballet in 1948 with Lincoln Kirstein, “a …Harvard educated…Boston Brahmin Jew.” In 1928, Kirstein had seen Balanchine dance in London. When Kirstein began to pursue his dreams of bringing ballet to America in 1933, Balanchine was “discouraged by the lack of opportunity in Europe and feeling lonely and dispirited—[and] was open to new possibilities.” And so the men crossed paths with an intention of having a thriving ballet company in three years. Although building the ballet in America took longer than anticipated, the relationship between the two men began the history of ballet in America that young dancers learn today.

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63 Vaudeville, a distinctly American performance, can be seen as a middle ground between the freak show and the ballet, drawing choreographing and dance from the ballet, and spectacle, performance space, and audience culture from the freak show.
64 Homans, 448-449.
65 Ibid.
66 Ibid.
67 Ibid., 456.
68 Ibid., 459.
69 Ibid.
70 Ibid., 460.
Balanchine and Kirstein launched the School of American Ballet (SAB) in New York City in 1934. SAB remains, today, one of the most well-known ballet schools and trains dancers that dance in some of the most famous companies: New York City Ballet, American Ballet Theater, San Francisco Ballet, and others. After the creation of SAB, the men struggled to create a company. Their initial attempt to found the American Ballet in 1935 failed due in large part to lack of funding. Interestingly, Kirstein’s vision for ballet in America included “mak[ing] ballet American by producing works on American themes by American choreographers, writers, and composers; he pressed Balanchine to make ballets about sports (the ballet master refused).”

There was still a concern that ballet was European and needed to be distinguished in its American form. But Balanchine was European in his roots and his practice, thus carrying with him connotations of ballet as courtly art.

Eventually, the idea of creating an American ballet was superseded by an aim to have “theater, music, and dance on a par with the great European cities” in New York. Ultimately, Kirstein and Balanchine successfully created Ballet Society, which would eventually become New York City Ballet in 1948. Of this long awaited success in creating a company, Homans says, “it took a generation of political leaders with strong ties to Europe, and a desire to build culture and the arts in America; it took the Second World War, which brought government into the business of culture, and perhaps most important of all, created a new sense of idealism and urgency…”

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71 Ibid., 461.
72 Ibid., 463.
73 Ibid.
74 Ibid.
This capsule history of the transformation of ballet after World War II requires a bit more unpacking.

Suddenly, after World War II, people’s attention turned to the ballet, changing art culture in the United States. It was not until this point that ballet became “an icon of high modernism”75 in the United States with which we associate it today. Yet, it is still hard to pinpoint what hurled American into an obsession with long limbed women transporting audience members into ethereal worlds. Of the increase of popularity of the ballet, Homans says “after decades of chorus-girl marginality and Russian exoticism, ballet suddenly seemed to represent something urgently important and quintessentially American, both in its dances and dancers. It mattered in ways that it never had before—or since.”76 Around 1940, “quintessentially American” performances shift from the freak show to the ballet—just before World War II the organized, classic American freak show teeters out (Bogdan dates the end of the freak show at 1940, although of course it remains in other forms), whereas in the years following the war, American ballet becomes more visible, important, and popular. This shift is dramatic both culturally and socioeconomically, leading us to ask why post World War II, do we look to an art that “reveal[s] idealized worlds concerned with the supernatural and exotic, offering refuge from the rapidly growing, grimy, industrial world?”77 What changes at this point in history in terms of leisure, entertainment, and class that makes an audience less inclined to purchase cheap tickets to see a fat lady’s arm rolls, and instead watch a group of incredibly thin women perform like angels?

75 Ibid., 451.
76 Ibid.
77 Adair, 92.
Homans attributes this shift to a new “golden age of art and ideas” fueled by the boom after the war (which had been a boost to the U.S. “economy, to public morale, and to the country’s standing in the world”) and “the influx of highly educated and cultivated émigrés fleeing the Nazi and Soviet regimes,” who created “a critical mass of talent and energy spanning the arts, sciences and humanities.”

I am hesitant to credit this shift to highly educated émigrés, though immigration was certainly a part of why ballet training became more formalized, in part because the freak show was quite popular at World’s Fairs in Europe. Perhaps the most crucial shift is that after World War II and continuing through the Cold War, “both the public and private sectors invested unprecedented resources in education and the arts.”

During this time Lincoln Center, home of the New York City ballet, was built, funded by wealthy people who felt that “Lincoln Center...is a living monument to the will of free men acting together on the basis of their own initiative and idealism.”

After the 1940s, “as the middle classes grew more affluent, children flooded into suburban music and dance schools and new audiences flocked to theaters.” By the 1950s, ballet’s location as a fine or high art was secure, and this was coupled with its new popularity as a gendered exercise for little girls across America.

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78 Homans, 452
79 Ibid.
80 Bogdan, 52.
81 Homans, 452.
82 Homans, 455
83 Ibid.; see also, McGowan, Margaret M. L’art du ballet de cour en France, 1581-1643. (Centre national de la recherche scientifique, 1978), 37.
85 Homans, 454.
In contrast to the freak show, ballet was (and is) a “lavish, aristocratic court art, a high—and hierarchical—elite art with no pretense to egalitarianism.” The sideshow aimed to display oddity and thus make the audience feel superior, while the ballet displays effortlessness and beauty that intend to uplift and audience. Freak shows, as we have seen, capitalized on disability and deformity in order to boost the morale and identity of other citizens. Ballet, instead, asks an audience to think about what it meant to occupy high culture, high society, and embrace the fine arts. Advertisements about the ballet refer to the performances as “brilliant, breathtaking, deeply moving, compelling, fascinating, and provocative.” Yet at the same time, 1940 marks a pivotal year between the two forms of performances that both insisted on the display of bodily spectacle for an audience.

**The Emergence of the Sylph as Spectacle**

Homans suggests that what draws us to the ballet is an “appreciation of etiquette and form.” She asks us to think about ballet as

A system of movement as rigorous and complex as any Language. Like Latin or Ancient Greek, it [has] rules, conjugations, declensions. Its laws, more over, were not arbitrary, they correspond to the laws of nature. Getting it “right” was not a matter of opinion of taste: ballet was a hard science with demonstrable physical facts.

The third chapter of this thesis will focus on ballet training and technique, but I think it is important to conceptualize ballet as a rigid language to understand its historical

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86 Homans, 448.
88 Homans, xv.
89 Ibid.
locus as a “high art” and an American leisure pastime in contrast, it seems to the
loose performances of the freak show.

The ballet distances itself from the specimen, calling upon the sylph as its
formal icon. The associations that we have with ballet today such as pointe, the tutu,
and even “the association of the female dancer with ethereal creatures of fantasy, such
as sylphs and fairies” were not major characteristics of the ballet until the 19th
century.\textsuperscript{90} Still, the rise of the ballet draws attention to the tension of this symbol: “the
unattainable sylph being danced by a real woman.”\textsuperscript{91} The sylph is imaginary; an
idealized spirit unattainable to earthly humans. The sylph is transcendent, “offer[ing]
the lure of the unknown.”\textsuperscript{92} The construction of the sylph seems oppositional to that of
the specimen or disabled; however, the two are both creatures oppositional to not only
each other, but also the figure of the normate.

\textbf{Attending the Ballet}

What can one expect when attending the ballet? The cost of purchasing a
ticket to see the New York City Ballet repertory at Lincoln Center ranges from
twenty-nine dollars to one hundred and sixty four dollars depending on where one
chooses a seat.\textsuperscript{93} Some theaters hold up to five thousand audience members.\textsuperscript{94} Though
audience members sit side-by-side in the dark, once the performance has begun, the
audience is still largely divided by class, due to the huge range in the price of the
tickets purchased. In fact, entering the theater is entering into these class differences;
some people dress formally for the ballet as they would the opera, while others wear

\textsuperscript{90} Adair, 96.
\textsuperscript{91} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{92} Ibid., 100.
\textsuperscript{94} Foster, “Reading Choreography,” 60.
jeans. The theater is indoors and pristine; it smells faintly of cleaning solution. There is no trash on the floor. In the winter, is it heated and in the summer air-conditioned to ensure the comfort of the audience.

While the lights are still up on the audience and the curtains closed, the gaze of the audience members is on each other and on the beautiful, fancy theater. Audience members sit in deep red, velvet seats. The stage is high above the audience, forcing us to look up as the watch the show. The proscenium is often decorated with intricate designs, shapes, and patterns. There are curtains, closed upon entrance, that reveal the stage only after the lights on the audience go out. The birth of the proscenium follows a transition of dances out of courts and onto the stage. Prosceniums create a window or frame around the action for the audience and distance the viewers from the performers. The arches are commonly referred to as the fourth wall, which, in ballet, is not broken, i.e. the dancers do not usually interact with the audience; “proscenium auditoriums tend to preserve the strong distinction between life and art, important to choreographers like Balanchine.”95 The creation of the proscenium and framing also created a setting where the audience could only see the performance from one point of view, therefore creating space for more illusions (lights, set pieces, formations). In fact, this point of view “implies a single perspective from which the dancer is to be viewed and a hierarchy of optimum viewing locations in the auditorium”96 as sitting close to the center, but not too close to the stage is considered “the best seat in the house.”

95 Foster, “Reading Choreography,” 60.
96 Ibid., 61.
Additionally, the proscenium places more emphasis on the actual technique of the dancers as the audience’s attention is focused on their bodies due to their position in the theater and lights directing their gaze. When the ballet begins, the audience lighting fades and the conductor of the orchestra arrives; he, usually a man, is dressed formally in a tuxedo, and the audience applauds his entrance. He bows in recognition of the respect accorded him. The large, majestic curtain is raised revealing, usually, a ballerina, posed in beautiful lighting, and the ballet begins.\footnote{In her chapter, “Reading Choreography,” Foster indicates that lights coming up on a dancer who is already on stage suggests, “You are now able to see events that have been going on for some time;” whereas lights rising on an empty stage and a dancer entering after suggests, “This is presented for you.” (Foster, “Reading Choreography,” 63.)}

**Freak Show and Ballet, take two**

As these two brief histories demonstrate, the freak show and the ballet differ dramatically. The freak show’s popularity is tied to the rise of mass entertainment, a newly accessible leisure for middle and working class citizens. The performance is interactive, the stage close, and the audience is invited to gaze at medical and cultural bodily oddities from a position of superiority. In contrast, the ballet, originally a high-court invention, only took off in the United States after World War II, with the influx of Russian and European art workers. Even in the United States, the ballet retains some of its history as a regal art form of the upper classes, entertainment for the elite. The performance is distant, the stage is far, and the audience is invited to gaze at super-human, sylph bodies. Still I have told these histories side-by-side in order to explore how our understanding of the gaze, visuality and difference, and form and deformity might be expanded when we juxtapose the freak show and the ballet, rather than hewing to the dichotomies between them. This juxtaposition, which I take as my
method throughout the thesis, might, in the end, help us undercut those very
dichotomies of low versus high art, specimen versus sylph, sub- versus super-human
and deformity versus perfection that encourage us to view only the differences
between these performances, and not what they may share.
Chapter Two

Reading the Monstrous Woman: Amalgamation, Mixture, Spectacle

“Women, as sign of difference, is monstrous. If we define the monster as a bodily entity that is anomalous and deviant vis-à-vis the norm, then we can argue that the female body shares with the monster the privilege of bringing out a unique blend of fascination and horror” – Rosi Braidotti ¹

The end of chapter one concludes with two brief but distinct histories of the ballet and the freak show. These histories juxtapose the specimen with the sylph; the beautiful, technical, formal woman’s body in the ballet with the grotesque, pathological, deformed body of the freak. Both the specimen and the sylph are spectacles, but their histories suggest oppositional forms of art in highly gendered terms. But what if begin to read these forms together? This chapter explores both the freak performer and the ballerina as monstrous.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines “monstrous” as “an animal or plant…that is abnormally developed or grossly deformed” and as “something repulsively unnatural, an abomination; a thing which is outrageously or offensively wrong.” ² I use monstrosity as an umbrella term to conceptualize bodies labeled grotesque, abject, and disabled throughout this chapter. In her work, Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self, Margrit Shildrick explores a blurring between the self and other as a form of monstrosity. ³ Following Shildrick, we may define any threat to “individual autonomous selfhood…hybrid creatures, conjoined

twins, human clones, cyborg embodiment, and others” as monstrous. These definitions highlight anomalies—gendered and racial ambiguities, mixture. In her work, *The Female Grotesque*, Mary Russo describes the Bearded Lady, the Fat Lady, the Hottentot Venus, and many other female forms as monstrous because they draw together “potential grotesque qualities across gender, in relation to both the female-coded and the male coded body.” These concepts allow us to explore both the freak and the ballerina as monstrous, as both specimen and the sylph are “odd boundary creatures” that pivot on a contested relationship to normativity and the normate. Because monstrosity is rooted in hybridity—Shildrick argues that “the monstrous body is the figure of an ambiguous identity”—both the sub-human freak and the super-human ballerina can be read as monstrous.

Monstrosity is a visual word; it is something we can see on the body—and it is the importance of the visual gaze that guides my argument in this chapter, and also my method of reading images for monstrosity. But first, I want to call attention to the etymology of the word monster. Garland Thomson reminds us that “the Latin word *monstra*, “monster,” also means “sign” and forms the root of our word *demonstrate*,

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4 Shildrick, 5.
5 Russo, 14.
6 Donna Haraway (cited in Russo) discusses “odd boundary creatures” (“simians, cyborgs, women”)…as “promising and non-innocent monsters…may be signs of possible worlds.” This allows us to situate the freak and the ballerina in this context as they are the specimen and the sylph and, therefore, may be considered odd boundary creatures. (Russo, Mary J. *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, and Modernity*. (New York: Routledge, 1995), 15).
7 Shildrick, 5.
8 Note that the queer body is also a monstrous body because queer bodies (like monstrous ones) exist in opposition to a norm.
9 Garland Thomson says, “by the eighteenth century the monster’s power to inspire terror, awe, wonder, and divination was being eroded by science, which south to classify and master rather than reverse the extraordinary body. The scientist’s and philosopher’s cabinets of curiosities were transformed into the medical man’s dissection table. The once marvelous body that was taken as a map of human fate now began to be seen as an aberrant body that marked the borders between the normal and the pathological” (“Introduction: From Wonder to Error—A Genealogy of Freak Discourse in Modernity,” 9).
meaning, “to show.”

The root of the word monster shows the ways in which monsters are configured as demonstrating or displaying—they are spectacles of difference. Indeed, as Garland Thomson argues “icons upon which people discharge their anxieties, convictions, and fantasies.”

Reading the freak show woman and the ballerina as forms of female monstrosity allows me to explore the stakes of gendered and racialized ambiguity staged in these performances. The appeal of the spectacle of the specimen and the sylph is dependent on the display of ambiguity; there is something about these bodies that is not quite human, not quite woman. In drawing attention to amalgamation in the images that follow, I explore differences that can be located or seen on the body, but I also seek out an amalgamation of forms, performances, and theories in order to draw together two seemingly distinct monstrous bodies: the ballerina and the freak. Reading the ballet and freak show performances as gendered performances of monstrosity enables us to see the similarities between the art forms. It also allows us to think about performances of gender as imperative to categories such as freakish and normal, disrupting ideas that women are inherently monstrous or the freak is inherently disabled and grotesque.

11 Ibid.
13 Here, Foucault’s concept of normalization as power is essential to understanding the way women’s bodies have created and sustained rules about men’s bodies. (Russo, 10). The inspection of female bodies, as I will discuss later, form deviance, thus forming some semblance of normal located on bodies that perform masculinity.
Theorizing the Monstrous Woman

The concept of the monstrous woman has been widely theorized about by Mary Russo, Barbara Creed, and Margrit Shildrick, among others; Aristotle may have provided the first definition of the female body as freakish. As Braidotti’s epigraph tells us, women have historically been understood as monsters; we are the freaks, the deviant bodies that uphold masculinity and purity; as disability is to ability, woman is to man. Women form life within their bodies and are characterized by blood and gaping holes. Our bodies transform, expand and contract, and bleed. They are cavernous and grotesque. Mikhail Bakhtin explores the female grotesque in terms of the “senile, pregnant hag,” which unites the female and the grotesque, and also generates an amalgamation of desexualized and infertile and sexualized and fertile. Further, the pregnant body is monstrous because it disrupts autonomous selfhood since two bodies inhabit one; she is a hybrid. The centrality of femaleness to monstrosity, alongside the purportedly dichotomous performances of gender we see in the freak show and the ballet, makes this a particularly suggestive concept for my readings.

The freak show and the ballet capitalize on the idea of bodies as icons and spectacles. Though the freak show more obviously displays legible bodies that serve

14 Aristotle wrote, “woman is literally a monster: a failed and botched male who is only born female due to an excess of moisture and of coldness during the process of conception.” (Battersby, C., The Phenomenal Woman. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), 491); see also, Ussher, Jane M. Managing the Monstrous Feminine Regulating the Reproductive Body. (London: Routledge, 2006), 1.
15 Mary Russo says, “the positioning of the grotesque—as superficial and to the margins—is suggestive of a certain construction of feminine.” (Russo, 1). This alignment between grotesque and feminine is important to my construction and definition of monstrosity as well.
16 Mary Russo discusses this very notion as she explains that the grotesque appears as a deviation from the norm and the female is identified against the man (Russo, 11, 12).
17 Mary Russo’s The Female Grotesque does this as well and further explores the history of the grotesque (grotto-esque – caves/unrecognizable) (Russo, 1).
18 Shildrick, 2.
as a screen onto which audiences project their own gendered, racial, and sexual anxieties, the ballet, too, exists in the same format: an audience watches and reads a performing body through ideas about ideal race, gender, and sexuality. Though this body may not be coded as deviant by the setting of the performance, it, nonetheless, functions as a spectacle of gender, sex, and race.

The histories of the freak show and the ballet that I detailed in the first chapter, and perhaps all performance, are contingent on the idea that our eyes tell us truths about the body. Seeing is an essential part of these performances; we are able to see beauty and form or we are able to see disability and deformity. Bodies that are ambiguous or mixed disrupt our conceptions about what bodies should look like and, therefore, threaten our perception of the stabilities of our selves. In her essay, “Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory,” Garland Thomson reminds us, “female, disabled, and dark bodies are supposed to be dependent, incomplete, vulnerable, and incompetent bodies.” Indeed, she argues, what femininity and blackness have in common is that they both enact performance that simultaneously positions these bodies as expendable, but also as threatening to a national white masculinity. For this reason, the freak show contains and displays bodies that are grotesque in a performance environment where performers are distanced from the audience, thus creating a space where the audience feels safe to stare—a removal that is also at work in the ballet.

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19 In our culture we have opposed beauty and disability, stripping disability of sexuality and power. 
21 Ibid., 8.
In my reading, monstrosity is the visual categorization of amalgamation. Performances ask audience members to stare intently at bodies for entertainment. And, while many scholars have explored the politics of this gaze, I am interested more in what the gaze does—then and now. The gaze defines and labels bodies. Without the gaze of others, these bodies would not be considered deviant, disabled, or extraordinary. In Garland Thomson’s Staring, she discusses “the familiar American disapproval or staring as inappropriate looking—as visual intrusion, a surrender to the sensational, unconstrained, voyeurism” She references the work of Susan Sontag to think about staring at disability as an intrusion, or, as Sontag deems it, “a despised impulse” What the freak show and the ballet do to counteract this notion is to frame performances and to put bodies on display in a situation where it is appropriate or customary for spectators to stare at bodies as spectacle. Sometimes, this spectacle shores up the audiences’ superiority, sometimes it challenges it. In either case, the bodies on display also threaten our own identities, categories, and boundaries. As I look at the Bearded Lady, the Ape-Faced Hairy Woman, the Fat Lady, and the ballerina, I navigate both the gaze I impose on them now and their own embodied performances for the audience of the past. As I use my own gaze to read images, I invite you, too, to consider the ways bodies that display visible markers of mixture

22 In this thesis I do not go into the politics of voyeurism and agency, though they have been widely theorized about. Many disability scholars problematize freak shows because they necessitate a pathological, gawking gaze. For more on gaze see Rosenberg, Brian. “Teaching Freaks” in Freakery Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body. (New York: New York University Press, 1996). 309. Also see, Garland Thomson, Extraordinary Bodies, 60, 74.
23 For more reading about the politics of gaze, see Garland Thomson’s Staring: How We Look.
25 Ibid.
26 Sontag, Susan. Regarding the Pain of Others. (Macmillan, 2003), 95, 97. See also Garland Thomson, Staring, 186.
27 Shildrick, 4.
can be understood as monstrous and how reading these bodies as monstrous draws our attention to the anxieties around gender, race, and nation that these performances enact. (All images follow this chapter).

**The Bearded Lady: Gender as Mixture**

In Figure 1, Annie Jones, an iconic freak show Bearded Lady is seen “admiring herself in a mirror.” This image is striking not only because of Jones’ ambiguous body itself, but also because of its use of the mirror. We, as viewers, are able to see Jones’ front side and backside, thus complicating the two-dimensionality of typical images, and attempting to give us a three-dimensional look at Jones. The use of the mirror further complicates our understanding of binary gender. We are immediately drawn in to the image because of Jones’ excessive hair; she has a lot of hair both on her head, but also on her face, as we are able to see in the mirror. Not only does she have a beard, but also her hair reaches down her back to below her knees. Her hair is loose except for a little bit that is pinned up at the top of her head with a bow, a marker of her femininity that jars with the beard, a marker of masculinity.

In the mirror image, we see Jones “admiring her beard in the mirror.” Her beard is full and thick; one that must have taken time and grooming to perfect. It lies flat on her face and ends just in between her bosom. Her mustache is trimmed to keep all of the hairs in their place, creating a clean line just above her upper lip. Jones’ sideburns transition from the expected hair on her head to her well-groomed beard

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28 Figure 1. Annie Jones, “The Bearded Lady.” Shown admiring herself in a mirror. Photo by Charles Eisenmann, c. 1888. (Becker Coll., Syracuse University.); Bogdan, 225.
30 Ibid.
and also serve as another example of well-kept hair on her face. Her excess of hair indicates some level of self-care, suggesting that if she did not trim her beard, or whiskers, there would be hair all over her face. In fact, many Bearded Ladies, or ladies who were diagnosed with hirsutism, did grow hair all over their bodies. However, the clothes bearded ladies typically wore covered up some hair in order to highlight other hair as the site of spectacle.

In this image, in addition to the long hair and the bow, Jones wears a corset, drawing attention to her small waist and larger bust and hips, a marker of Victorian femininity. The corset, itself, is an example of one way she—like many women—trains her body to perform legible femininity in order to craft her performance as “authentic.” However, the corset also asks us to consider the ways in which authentic femininity is itself an illusion, as it requires performances and or molding of a body to produce the effects of “natural femininity.”

The fact that Annie Jones is looking at herself in a mirror in this image is significant. Of course, without the mirror, the image would be of a woman with exceptionally long hair, but there would not be anything “freakish” about her. The image asks us, as viewers, to consider reflections: the ways we see ourselves in others, and the ways others see us. Butler posits, “the boundary of the body as well as the distinction between internal and external is established through the rejection and transvaluation of something originally part of identity into a defiling otherness.” She continues by saying “what constitutes through division the “inner” and “outer” worlds of the subject is a border and boundary tenuously maintained for the purpose of social

31 Ibid.
regulation and control,” suggesting that display and gaze are responsible for processing and categorizing performances of gender. There are only two possible ways to view our own “externality.” The first is the literal way: through a mirror. The second way is to “occupy the perspective others have on us,” which Butler suggests to us by noting that gender is performative.

Disability studies critics like Rosemarie Garland Thomson have argued that freak shows were mirrors through which audience members could recognize their own normalcy. Elizabeth Grosz discusses the freak show as a place where one finds “fascination with our mirror-images, a fascination with the limits of our own identities as they are witnessed from the outside.” Much of the freak show and the performances of freaks rely on the audience’s spectatorship; their vision is what deems these people freaks and simultaneously upholds ideals of what a freak should be. This image of Jones, however, complicates this notion by suggesting that we might position ourselves in front of certain mirrors, and thus stage certain kinds of recognition, and reveal. In this image, is Annie Jones her own mirror image? The complex visuality of this image seems to reiterate the ways our binary gender system relies on being rendered legible or intelligible to others, suggesting that Jones is both a viewer and a projection.

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33 Ibid.
34 Grosz, 65.
35 Ibid.
37 Grosz, 65.
38 Grosz, 65.
39 In Nyong‘o’s Amalgamation Waltz, he says, “a genealogy of performance…must examine...historical truths that become visible in the negative space around them, training our attention precisely upon that which an empiricist gaze will overlook” (35). He then explains Michael
In this image, Jones presents herself as a Bearded Lady: she wears the costume of a Bearded Lady, decked in ruffles, a corset, posed delicately. Her hair and beard are finely combed. Her image can be read as a demonstration of Butler’s notion that all identities are performative by giving us a double-sided identity to view; from the back, she is “feminine;” the mirror reveals that she has a beard, a “masculine” attribute. Her display produces tensions: she simultaneously performs “freakishness” and normalness,” while belonging to neither category. Parts of her body fit neatly into a binary gender system, but combined she fits into neither category without confusion. She is able to trick our eyes by positioning herself in front of a mirror; she is also able to destabilize our affirmations about our own seemingly stable gendered performances. Reading her body allows us to see the ways in which monstrosity is constructed by locating mixture on her body; she also allows us to see the way hybridity is destabilizing, contagious, and ultimately dangerous to those who might seek to locate themselves as normate.

The Ape-Faced Hairy Woman: Race and Gender

In the Amalgamation Waltz: Race, Performance, and the Ruses of Memory, Tavia Nyong’o reminds us that words like miscegenation, hybridity, amalgamation, mixture, and blood are words that carry “historical baggage.” As I described in the last chapter, during the late nineteenth century, sexologists studied female and black

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Sappol’s “instatement” of the body: “a process by which the ‘anatomical body’ was captured by and for ‘the bourgeois self.’ Sappol tracks how the body became “if not a microcosm then a mirror or projection, of nation, class, race, gender, species, history [and] evolution over the course of the nineteenth century” (36); Nyongó, Tavia Amolo Ochieng. The Amalgamation Waltz: Race, Performance, and the Ruses of Memory. (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 2009).

40 Nyongó, 17.
bodies, searching for signs of difference. Doctors, predominantly white and male, spent the majority of their time studying women, inverts, and black people. They felt confident that, for example, “women’s genitalia and reproductive anatomy held a valuable and presumably visual key to ranking bodies according to norms of sexuality.” Further, institutions of slavery and racism were propagated by beliefs that the black body was more closely related to animals and thus more savage than a white body. It is clear that science existed only within the realm of other hegemonic structures of power; for this reason, most of the science (evidence based or not) worked to support not dispel anxiety about mixture of any racial, gendered, or sexual form.

Monstrosity could be seen and physically located on the body. Race was one of the main categories under which anatomical markers were searched for and consequently discovered; Havelock Ellis writes in the preface to his book, “the question of sex—with the racial questions that rest on it—stands before the coming generations as the chief problem for solution.” Race, sex, and sexuality are intertwined as monstrous from the very start because of their collective threat and power over white manhood. Ellis’ concern with miscegenation was the threat to the purity of the “civilized” (white) races and nations that racial / national mixture might

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41 Havelock Ellis, a sexologist of this era who published Studies in the Psychology of Sex, believed that an “invert” might be visually distinguishable from the ‘normal’ body through anatomical markers, just as differences between the sexes had traditionally been mapped upon the body” (Somerville, Siobhan. “Scientific racism and the emergence of the homosexual body.” Queering the Color Line (2000), 63. This notion is then perpetuated in Julia Pastrana’s body as a connection between human and ape because people were conditioned to read her body as inversion.
42 Somerville, 66.
43 Ibid., 62.
44 As scientists and sexologists gave a name to homosexuality, scientific racism, too, became prevalent. Above I show that these bodies danger was that they threatened white masculine purity. Thus, these bodies are monstrous.
bring. The histories of these “inverts” or “deviants” is intertwined and associated because of the threat they presented to purity and dominance of whiteness. Race, sex, and sexuality are intertwined as monstrous from the very start because of their collective threat and power over white manhood. I revive the term, monstrous, given the histories of sexology I detail above in an effort to conceptualize monstrosity as trained and achieved, rather than inherent or condemned. In this way, I am reclaiming monstrous and, in doing so, applying it to a broader scope of bodies.

I preface my next reading of the image of Julia Pastrana with this in order to think about how racial mixture and gender mixture might work to produce the freak’s body as a monstrous body (Figure 2). Mixture is the opposite of purity. It is contamination—two elements coming into contact with each other to create something impure. Freaks and women are sites of this coming together (amalgamation). In the image of Pastrana we are faced with many kinds of amalgamations: white and black, male and female, animal and human.

In Figure 2, we see Julia Pastrana; her categorization, though sometimes as a Bearded Lady, is most commonly as “the ape-faced, dog-faced or hairy woman.” Pastrana “was a Mexican Indian, who, according to her showman husband, was discovered as an infant abandoned in a remote desert region in Central America.” Her image reflects anxieties about gender, race, and primitive others: these mixtures highlight each other and produce her body as spectacle. Although she, Sean Trainor notes, “sported a remarkable beard, she was not, in the professional sense at least, a bearded lady.” Instead, she presented herself as the “Ugliest Woman in the World,”

46 Ibid. She was born in 1834.
the “Bear Woman,” or as a “missing link” between humans and apes.” 47 Her freak performance may be read as a “What is it?” performance; is she a woman or an ape? In either case, she is a specimen—markers of blackness and hairiness mix with civilized femininity, and the combination makes her monstrous. This image differs from that of Annie Jones because it is not just Pastrana’s femininity at question, but rather, because of her racialization, her humanity. 48

Like Annie Jones, Pastrana wears a dress that is embroidered and tight at the top, cinches as the waist, and flairs out at the hips. Her dress performs a widely recognized assumed femininity. Pastrana’s dress, however, is shorter than Jones’ dress, revealing her calves; indeed, the length of the dress “in her time would have been regarded as immodest except in a dancer or circus performer.” 49 This not only sexualizes Julia, but it also allows the hair on her arms, neck, and legs to be visible. Pastrana also wears jewelry – two bracelets and a necklace with a cross, symbolizing her faith and commitment to religion. The jewelry also references a performance of normative femininity of her era. But taken together, these signs create tension by asking us to look both at her excessive hair and at the jewelry that adorns her body. Indeed, the dress might even be read as mocking as it highlights certain trappings of white femininity, but situates them on a body to which they do not typically belong. The mixture of signs of animality (the hair), proper femininity (the jewelry), and

48 Ibid., 552.
debased femininity (the short dress) renders Pastrana a figure that both references and destabilizes her viewers’ notions of normalcy.

While their clothing is similar, Pastrana’s stance is quite different from Annie Jones’. She stands with her feet spread wide apart and the image displays her entire body, front on. This is a performance usually reserved for masculinity as it commands attention and is a sign of power. She looks away from the camera. The background is bare, and we are unable to place Pastrana in a Victorian setting – she has no mirror or husband; the space is void of signs that could help the viewer categorize her gender. Photographs that display women in specific, recognizable settings fall under the category that Robert Bogdan calls “aggrandized photos.” These photographs “gave status to freaks, offsetting their disabilities.” The other kind of photograph that Robert Bogdan categorizes is the “exotic” photograph. Exotic photographs portray the freak with props and dress that further exoticized their differences. This image of Pastrana occupies a space between an aggrandized and exotic image. The Victorian femininity Pastrana portrays is an appropriated form as Victorian femininity did not encompass non-white women in its definition. Pastrana’s performance is complex; her own performances of femininity and body hair are read through understandings of black femininity as freakish, animalistic—monstrous.

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50 Bogdan
51 Dennett, 78.
52 Articles about Pastrana discuss her hair growth as a result of “generalized hypertrichosis associated with gingival hyperplasia” (Miles, 160). Her beard is attributed to medical conditions in a way that Annie Jones’ beard did not need to be because of her race and her proximity to an ape for sexologists.
The Ballerina: Reading Gender, Reading Race

Reading gendered performances in the freak show allows us to further complicate and explore the notion of gender in the ballet. If the freak women display a mix of gender and racial characteristics to become something grotesque, a spectacle of corporeality, then can we read the ballerina’s performance of gender as doing something similar? This might seem an odd question since ballerinas have somehow become a symbol of femininity; Balanchine famously declared, “Ballet is Woman.” He also said “the ballet is a purely female thing; it is a woman, a garden of beautiful flowers, and man is the gardener.”53 And many dance scholars, including Christy Adair and Anna Aalten, write about ballerina’s supposed femininity. But ballerinas do not adhere to many of the norms or ideals that are commonly associated with femininity.

In part this is because of changing standards of beauty; the body of the ballerina has become thinner and thinner over time as thinness has come to be prioritized as beautiful in our society (see Figure 8, Figure 9, and Figure 10).54 We see the way the ballerina becomes the antithesis to the Fat Lady; she lacks flesh. This also reflects the shift in performance culture from the freak show to the ballet as restraint and training became more central, and excess and “natural” bodies were less ideal—an issue I will address in the next chapter. It is significant, however, that the ballerina’s imagined femininity and rigid training is valorized—she is rarely figured as a freak or a monster. Upsetting this dichotomy, I explore the way ballet culture

54 I include these three images to show ballerinas becoming thinner throughout the decades.
mimics early sexology by propelling anxieties about bodies, race, and gender onto the stage and asking viewers to be complicit in the hierarchies that comprise aesthetics. The ballet can be read, like the freak show (and like sexology), as a product and performance of cultural anxiety.

Iconic images of the ballet depict women in pink tights being tossed about by a man. For many, the ballet upholds ideas of women as fragile, delicate, and passive. The roles constructed for women maintain dominant ideology of women needing the support of men; physically this notion is reinforced during lifts where the man is responsible for controlling the woman. Feminist scholarship has often viewed ballet as oppressive because it is patriarchal and “denies women their own agency,” yet, scholars like Aalten, Foster, Adair, and Davis recognize that the art is more complicated than simple subordination because it combines bodies, discipline, rigor, and strength. As Aalten writes,

In western culture, physical strength and femininity are believed to be incompatible. The body and femininity are closely related as together they form the monstrous, fertility, and female sexuality, but bodily control and physical strength are not considered feminine. Physical achievements are associated with masculinity.

This is the notion from which stems the ballerina as hyper-feminine. The actual embodied experience of the ballerina says something completely different. Yet this association of femininity and the body lacking physical strength is one reason why we

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55 Bodies, race, and gender are all situated within my definition as central elements of monstrosity; I ask you here to think about monstrosity as a part of the ballet.
58 Daly, “The Balanchine Woman; Of Hummingbirds and Channel Swimmers,” 17.
might tend to endorse statements like Christy Adair’s when she writes, “ballet
upholds the dominant ideology...by continuing to select dancers on the basis of a
classical ideal of beauty, by reinforcing traditional sex roles and by the hierarchical
structures of both the training institutions and the ballet companies,” or Cynthia
Novack’s understanding that ballet perpetuates “stereotypes of
gender...representations of women as fragile creatures supported by powerful men.”
Yet if we look closely at the actual bodies and the performances of the ballerina,
drawing on my readings of the Bearded Lady and the Ape-Faced Woman, we can see
that ballet does simply reflect traditional femininity—at least not in an uncomplicated
way. Reading the ballerina through the lens of the freak show performance reveals
that monstrosity is part of the ballerina’s spectacle, though visually downplayed.

First, we might note that the female ballerina is actually quite masculinized.
Looking at Figure 5, we can see alongside the bun and the smile, she is flat chested
with slim hips—a “boyish” figure who is, if not masculine, at least androgynous.
Agnes de Mill, a dancer and choreographer, states “[t]he very physical stresses, the
strengthening and bracing and tautening of [the female dancer’s] back and leg supply
such a sense of driving power as to give her the illusion of male potency.”
Though the performance of a ballet body may appear light and effortless, these women work
hard to create, form, and mold that body, thus appropriating a physicality reserved for
men. Already, it is clear that the body of a ballerina is one that contradicts a gender

60 Adair, 88-89.
62 I say masculinized here, as she is flat chested with slim hips—a “boyish” figure that makes the ballerina androgynous.
64 Aalten, 272.
binary system, like the Bearded Lady, by displaying markers of both genders and allowing dissonance to exist on their bodies.

Consider the image of the *pas de deux* (Figure 3), a central and often climatic feature of many ballets. The *pas de deux*, which means step of two in French, is a duet typically performed by the lead male and female in a dance company. It is a moment that is meant to demonstrate the gender binary, as the man “supports, manipulates, and often conquers the woman.”65 In this way, it can be read a performance of understood heterosexuality and, thus, for many audience members, legible gender.66 Drawing on Butler, we know that we perceive gender in reference to heterosexual imaginary of “opposite sexes.” The Bearded Lady’s femininity is often played up by placing her next to a man, as a wife (Figure 4). Similarly, the female ballerina, perhaps because her body does not clearly adhere to markers of legible femininity, is posed as feminine through her dependence on a man. The *pas de deux* both exemplifies and complicates this performance of “femininity.” As the story goes, the desirable woman seduces the man and, in turn, he helps her accomplish movements that alone she could not perform. She is a body that he manipulates into beautiful, and yet distorted positions to awe an audience. The female dancer stands “en pointe, body facing front…”67 and epitomizes poise and grace—femininity.

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66 See Butler, *Imitation and Gender Insubordination*, 313.
67 Carter, 92.
However, let us take a moment to look at the language used to describe the

*pas de deux:*

pliant, quivering with responsiveness, ready to be guided anywhere, she inclines towards him, leaving one leg behind, ever erect, a strong reminder of her desire. As he promenades around the single pointe on which she balances, the leg lifts higher and higher. They pause at the moment her breast bone appears about to break. Arms in a wide V connect to his supporting lunge. The leg, a full 180 degrees vertical, looms behind them, white-pink, utterly smooth, charged with straining, vibrant vitality.

Then, she floats impetuously away from him. His gaze following her, his arm gestures a pathetic desire. As the music builds to its climax, she reaches the corner and turns back towards him. The emollient rush of her body into his outstretched arms results in yet another stiffening: she holds decorously rigid as he lifts and swirls her in a circle above his head. Her delicate tensility allows her to dwell there high in space, a proud ornament, a revolving bowsprit.68

The woman is far from powerless and feminine in this description. She is “pliant, quivering with responsiveness” and “ever erect.” She is later described as “white-pink, utterly smooth, charged with straining, vibrant vitality,” “tensility,” and “yet another stiffening,” all descriptions which further an image of the ballerina as phallus.69 As she “inclines towards him” she “leaves one leg behind, ever erect, a strong reminder of her desire.” She does not desire him or at least her desires do not line up with a heteronormative imaginary.

As the ballerina floats away from the man, he “gestures a pathetic desire.” His desire for her is pathetic; his need for her emasculates him, as it can be read as synonymous with desiring another man; for audience members, this may be grotesque because it queers masculinity. The masculinity in the *pas de deux* is not a strong, in

69 Ibid., 3.
control masculinity; instead, he is pathetic. As she softens back into his body there is another stiffening. The juxtaposition of emollient and stiffening is interesting; it calls on notions of femininity as soft and masculinity as hard, but it inverts or ignores them and leaves ambiguous who is soft and who is hard. As the man lifts the woman above his head we realize that it is “her delicate tensility” which “allows her to dwell there high in space, a proud ornament, a revolving bowsprit.” This, once again, inverts our notions of gender and power. Height is associated with power, and though the man is lifting the woman, it is the woman’s own strength that allows her to stay high in the air, above the man, as a “proud ornament, a revolving bowsprit.”

Her height and position in the air reflects ideas about high art and ballerinas being angelic. Yet her body, too, is dangerously ambiguous. Her body is in danger as her “breast bone appears about to break.” She “promenades around the single pointe on which she balances” as her legs lift higher and higher; she is at risk of falling off balance on such a small surface. There is impending danger and she is about to break, but she is also extending her legs and remains perpetually in motion, somewhat ignoring the suggestion of impending doom. She is described, on the one hand as “floating” which suggests that she is ethereal, a connotation associated with ballerinas and sylphs. On the other, the image of the bowsprit recalls the image of the ballerina as a phallus again to close the pas de deux. A close reading of this pas de deux reveals that it queers the gender binary, both in terms of the relations between the woman and the man, and within the desires and gendered performances of each.

Refer to Figure 3 and Figure 4. I place this image of a Bearded Lady and her husband directly after the image of the pas de deux to learn from each as we look
critically at performances of gender in both. Isn’t the woman in Figure 4 more “feminine” than the ballerina? The ballerina, Wendy Whelan, is an erect extension of the man holding her up. Her chest bone looks like it might burst through her skin. She has no breasts, no curves; instead her ribs are visible. The man holding her up is black; this image is contemporary and represents a mixture of races that is uncommon in the ballet where whiteness is nearly universal. The bodies of the ballet dancers resemble each other; the bodies of the Bearded Lady and her husband, too, look similar. In this way, the images might read visually as more homoerotic than heteronormative, even as the similarity of forms draws the viewers’ eyes towards the bodies.

Yet what distinguishes the Bearded Lady and the ballerina as feminine is the way they perform gender: their clothes, the stance, even their position in relation to the man. This performance is read backwards onto their bodies, while the tension between masculinity and femininity, sameness and difference keeps the viewer’s eye shuttling between figures and the gendered norms with which they play. Both women in the images shore up and unsettle gender norms because of their ambiguity, made even more explicit because of their position next to a man. Yet, both images rely on

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Misty Copeland was appointed a soloist at American Ballet Theater in 2007, but has not been promoted to a principal dancer since then. ABT’s three principal dancers are all white. In fact, Misty Copeland is the only black dancer in the company ("ABT: Dancers." ABT: Dancers. Accessed April 7, 2015).
New York City Ballet’s principal dancers are all white as well ("New York City Ballet." NYCB. Accessed April 7, 2015); "Building Diversity in Ballet: Black Swans Are Still Too Rare." From the Green Room: Dance/USA's E-Journal. Accessed April 7, 2015.
viewers reading cultural gender to form a narrative about sexuality consistent with masculinity and femininity.

The cultural imaginary of gender is built into the history of ballet performance. Contemporary ballet is heavily influenced by the Romantic Ballet of the 19th century, which heightened gender differences in ballet technique. Before this period, the *pas de deux* “placed great emphasis on male and female dancers performing alongside one another or traveling separately designated pathways in mirrored opposition.”71 Until the Romantic period, male and female dancers “shared a common vocabulary of steps.” 72 Romantic ballet, however, “celebrated the principle of distinct vocabularies for male and female dancers – the dainty and complex footwork, the extensions of the leg and balances for women and the high leaps, jumps with beats, and multiple pirouettes for men.”73 Additionally, pointe work became popular during this period (only women wear pointe shoes) along with partnering, which is often reminiscent of sex as the male dancer “support[s], guide[s], and manipulate[s] the female dancer,”74 which many expect to see at the ballet today. Two Romantic ballets that remain in companies’ repertories across the country, *La Sylphide* (1832) and *Giselle* (1841) are based on traditional, heterosexual star-crossed love stories. Boy meets girl, man falls in love with sylph, and prince falls in love with peasant; these are the stories we expect and do see that satisfy both heterosexuality and male – female distinctions.75

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72 Ibid.
73 Ibid.
74 Ibid.
Thus gender in ballet is read backward onto bodies through highly gendered technique and movement. It is the movement or posture that distinguishes male and female bodies on the stage from one another. Susan Foster, in her analysis of the *pas de deux*, shows us how the moment is gendered.

*She* wears pointe shoes, and *he* wears ballet slippers. *She* elaborates a vast range of intricate coordinations for legs, feet, arms, and head, while *he* launches into the air, defying gravity in a hundred different positions. *She* extends while *he* supports. *She* resides in front and *he* remains in back. *She* looks forward as *he* looks at her. *She* touches his arms, hands, and shoulders, whereas *he* touches her arms and hands and also her waist, thighs, buttocks, and armpits.\(^76\)

It is the movement, in other words, that produces gender on to bodies, dressed in unisex leotards.

Look, now, at Figure 5 and Figure 6. Figure 5 is an image of Wendy Whelan, a former principal dancer for the New York City Ballet dancing Odette in Swan Lake.\(^77\) Figure 6 is another, different image of Julia Pastrana. Wendy Whelan is thin and tall, lacking curves and breasts, and tall. She is also muscular. Her body resembles the body of a young boy; her costume projects Victorian Femininity onto her through the use of a corset, but without curves to define, it does not have a clearly feminine effect. In the second image, Pastrana is dressed like a ballerina. The costume is mocking; it places her into a version of femininity from which she is excluded. To this day, ballet remains a predominantly white art; Pastrana is “an unlikely

\(^{76}\) Foster, “The Ballerina’s Phallic Pointe,” 1.

Viewing these images in tandem allows us to locate the amalgamation that produces monstrosity in each image.

Whelan’s amalgamation is of masculinity and femininity: she is thin and masculine, and her body is related to the classical aesthetics of form that define the male body. She is symmetrical, closed, and monumental. Pastrana’s is of gender, race, and animality. Yet the unlikely ballerina reflects back on Whelan to open questions of heterosexuality, gender normativity, and whiteness and race in ballet, an art typically shielded by aesthetics. Viewing the ballet through the lens of the freak show allows us to explore the ways the ballerina performs ambiguous gender on her body, and a less-than-certain heterosexuality in her dance. At the same time, reading both as monstrous allows us to pay attention to the way these displays of ambiguity are precisely what makes these performances intriguing spectacle. This reading encourages us to notice the multiplicity of markers, both masculine and feminine, which can be read on the body of the Bearded Lady, the Fat Lady, and ultimately the ballerina. And it suggests that perhaps it is movement, technique, and performance that allows us to map gendered and racialized norms back onto ambiguous bodies, imagining one as sylph, angel, and (white) feminine and the other as specimen, monster, and (racialized) other. Reading them this way, we can see, too, possibilities

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78 I reference, here, Misty Copeland’s memoir, *Life in Motion: An Unlikely Ballerina*. Misty Copeland has received a lot of attention as the first major black ballerina and is a soloist with American Ballet Theater. Many call upon Misty as an example of an unlikely ballerina because racially she is distinct and because we have seen the way bodies are intertwined with race, her body is more muscular than the average white ballerina (Copeland, Misty. *Life in Motion: An Unlikely Ballerina*. (New York, New York: Touchstone, 2014)).

79 There is more work to be done on reading queerness in the ballet. In what ways does the ballet take on homosexual and queer narratives rather than heterosexuality at all? Does ignoring the queer spectacle of the ballet allow audiences to maintain a belief in their normalcy – or is it the queer suggestions that remind the audience of their panicked heterosexuality? See Stoneley, Peter. *A Queer History of the Ballet*. (New York: Routledge, 2006).
for the destabilization of gendered and racialized norms; we can ask, along with Judith Butler, “What possibilities of recirculation exist? Which possibilities of doing gender repeat and displace through hyperbole, dissonance, internal confusion, and proliferation the very constructs by which they are mobilized?”

The Fat Lady: Flesh, Sex, and Gender

And now, I make one more turn, back to the freak show, and the Fat Lady’s tent. I have waited until now to discuss the Fat Lady who might seem an obvious pair with the thin ballerina. However, I want not so much to contrast the Fat Lady and the ballerina, as to marshal the method I have pursued throughout this chapter to read the Fat Lady in terms of gender ambiguity and sexuality written on the body.

Fat Ladies were a performance that one could count on seeing during 19th and 20th century sideshows. Like the Bearded Lady, the Fat Lady can be read as a body whose gender is ambiguous because she wears many, opposing markers of gender. Robert Bogdan describes an ideal or prototypical Fat Lady as a “huge wom[a]n who wore dainty little girl’s outfits, danced soft shoe, and chuckled.” However, Fiedler argues “Fat Ladies, are, in short, the most erotically appealing of all Freaks, with the possible exception of male Dwarfs.” She is fleshy and flesh is erotic; female flesh...
is also monstrous and grotesque. She takes up too much space and defies norms like the Bearded Lady, but the norms she defies—those of weight and beauty—are different. Because of this her body is sexually ambiguous because it brings together the erotic and the anti-erotic.\textsuperscript{85}

Celesta Herrmann (Geyer), who would later be known as “Jolly Dolly” and “Dolly Dimples,” was born in 1901 in Cincinnati, Ohio and was one of the first widely famed fat ladies. Fiedler refers to Herrmann as the “It Girl” of Fat Ladies and “The World’s Most Beautiful Fat Lady”\textsuperscript{86}. She is pictured in Figure 7. In this image, we see the representation of a Fat Lady that Bogdan describes. She has a big smile across her face. Beneath her smile is her first, hardly distinguishable chin, which is layered on top of another roll of fat flesh. Her hair is short and has a bow in it—anther marker of girlishness. Her breasts are large but not accentuated by the shapeless dress she wears. She is seated on a large chair. Herrmann wears a dress that is quite revealing. It has thin straps and is relatively short. She holds up the dress up, daintily revealing the rolls of flesh that constitute her thighs and legs. Her legs are spread open on the chair and are the most exposed part of her body. Her knees are indistinguishable from the rolls of fat that work their way down her legs. There is no question that Dolly Dimples is large. But while rolls of fat are visible on her body, some of her features are simultaneously made to look small or perhaps young. We see youth on her body as we associated chubbiness with babies; additionally, we see

\textsuperscript{85} In \textit{Sideshow U.S.A.}, Rachel Adams quotes Leslie Fiedler who says, “freaks are inherently sexualized, for they evoke submerged desires that are otherwise available only in fantasies…[desiring a freak performer] is itself felt as freaky, however, since it implies not only a long for degradation but a dream of breaching the last taboo against miscegenation” (Adams, 152).

\textsuperscript{86} Fiedler, 130.
youth in her face as she does not have wrinkles, smiles broadly, and has chubby cheeks. Her body is a site where girlishness is juxtaposed with womanhood and is, therefore, open to many different possibilities or ambiguous in its form. Her ambiguity is grotesque for an audience because it invites and simultaneously repels an erotic gaze.87

I was a 555-pound freak, the side-show fat lady. Curiosity seekers came from all around to see me and to poke fun at me. Most of them refused to believe what they saw. A woman in Pittsburgh once asked me if my beefy legs were really mine. With my tongue in cheek I told her that they were phony, that I had an intake valve on my big toe and each morning I was inflated just to look that way.88 – Celesta Geyer

A more contemporary Fat Lady, Katy Dierlam performed Helen Melon in 1992 at the Coney Island Sideshow.89 Helen Melon does not discard the clichés of the sideshow performances; she embraces some of them as she can most simply be described as “a smiling, fleshy woman in a baby-doll costume.”90 Yet, as Sharon Mazer proclaims, “spectators faced far more than 500 pounds of fat female”91 when they saw Dierlam’s performance. (See Figure 12) Her huge arms rest on her round body. It is unclear where her bosom is separated from her stomach. She has several chins; her neck fades into rolls of fat. We also, however, see visible signs of performance. She wears a costume, a matching headband and a satin purple dress. She has blue eye shadow and red lipstick, and her nails are painted red.

87 It is grotesque because of what it suggests about a viewers’ desires. Are we eroticizing a child? A masculine woman? A fat woman?
89 Mazer, Sharon. “‘She’s so fat...’: Facing the Fat Lady at Coney Island’s Sideshows by the Seashore." Bodies Out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression (2001): 257-276.
90 Ibid.
91 Ibid., 257.
Dierlam/Melon complicates her performance. She is not only a fat lady, but she is also “a sexual provocateur, sideshow historian, contented wife, and cabaret singer.”

Dierlam/Melon, like Herrmann, blurs the child and the adult, the wife and the temptress. These recognizable performances of varying roles challenge the audience’s categories of understanding desirability, eroticism, and gender. The Fat Lady, unlike the ballerina, takes up space. Because her body confronts the viewer, taking up public space, she also performs a masculine physicality. Weight is often associated with masculinity because fatness takes up space. Men are permitted to be heavier than women; their bodies are given more space. But her performance, like the ballerina’s, is monstrous because she displays hybridity, ambiguity of genders.

Perhaps the Fat Lady is interesting because she takes up space that she is not allowed, as a woman, to occupy.

Fat, in America, means “uncontained desire, unrestrained hunger, uncontrolled impulse.” Fatness is synonymous with a lack of restraint in our society. We see fatness as a sin, a marker of a person who cannot control their desires; Butler notes that the ideal body is “trained, shaped, cultivated, and invested.” Beauty today attacks fat; we work to burn fat off of our bodies. “Areas that are soft, loose, or

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92 Ibid.
93 Weight is connected to masculinity as fatness implies taking up space in public (a realm reserved for me) and thinness is associated with the domestic realm (being kept inside, out of sight, small, and not affecting other’s space). I reference, here, some of Susan Bordo’s work on public as masculine and private as feminine and further work on weight as gendered. (Bordo, 48, 174, 290). See also; “Gendering Fat” in Tischner, Irmgard. Fat lives: A Feminist Psychological Exploration. (New York: Routledge, 2012).
95 These recognizable performances transposed onto different bodies ask the audience to complicate their understanding desirability, eroticism, and gender.
96 Bordo, 189.
‘wiggly’ are unacceptable.” Yet, as I will demonstrate in the next chapter, the Fat Lady is not a performance that enacts a loss of control. Indeed, her performance as Fat Lady requires a specificity of clothing, of posture, of bodily comportment that heightens the play of gender and sexuality on her body. Our pleasure in looking at the Fat Lady is intertwined with our fear of submitting to our desires, our wish to feed on all of the things we spend time denying. Reading the Fat Lady as a monstrous woman enables us to de-naturalize her body and instead explore her performance of ambiguous gender, sexuality, and desire for the spectator.

**Monstrous Form**

Reading the ballet through the freak show, we can see that the mixture and amalgamation of gender that made the freak women so compelling as monstrous spectacles is no less present in the ballet. The Bearded Lady wears signs of both masculinity and femininity on her body, the Ape-Faced woman signs of white femininity and racial primitivism, and the Fat Lady signs of grotesque and desirable femininity. It is these mixtures that make these figures both monstrous and compelling spectacle. The ballerina, who is often seen as feminine in form and distinguished from the masculine, in my reading displays both masculine and feminine bodily attributes and types of performance. It is this mixture, I argue, that makes the ballerina a compelling spectacle—not her hyper-femininity, but her ambiguity: the combination of masculine and feminine. All of the images I have read in this chapter are complex; they mix racial and gender markings on the body to

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98 Ibid., 190.
99 In the next chapter I will theorize about weight as training.
100 In Fiedler’s *Freaks* he says that fat ladies represent “eros without guilt or limit or satiety or exhaustion” (136).
create a spectacle. This visual amalgamation of attributes is precisely what I define as monstrous.

Monstrosity brings the freak show and the ballet together in spite of the vast differences that I described in Chapter One. As I stated in my introduction, monstrosity depends on a normate for those deemed sub-human and those deemed super-human. Monstrosity is the visual characteristic that draws spectators to both of these bodies. The performers serve as a screen on which audiences can project their anxieties about gender, race, class, sexuality, and anomaly. I return to Foucault and Butler for a moment to reiterate that both theorists help us to see that disciplining the body and training gender are not exceptional modes of conduct, but rather normative actions. Monstrous as spectacle is significant because it allows for visual representation of the fine line between monstrosity and normalcy: both the ballerina and the freak draw on, play with, and recombine cultural norms of gender, sexuality, race, and nation in ways recognizable to audiences then and now. It is my hope that reading these figures today as monstrous women might help us move away from dichotomizing these forms and instead draw our attention to the ways gender is performed on the body—the freak’s, the ballerina’s, and our own.
Figure 1: Julia Pastrana from Wellcome Library, London

Figure 2: Annie Jones, “The Bearded Lady.” Shown admiring herself in a mirror. Photo by Charles Eisenmann, c. 1888 (Becker Coll., Syracuse University). (Bogdan, 225)
Figure 3: Wendy Whelan and Craig Hall in the pas de deux from “After the Rain” in Ms. Whelan’s last City Ballet show. Credit Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

Figure 4: Bearded lady and husband. Mr. and Mrs. Meyers pose for the camera in an elegant Victorian setting. Photo by Bogardus, c. 1885. (Becker Coll., Syracuse University.) (Bogdan, 227)
Figure 5: Wendy Whelan in New York City Ballet's "Swan Lake." (Paul Kolnik / NYC Ballet)

Figure 6: Miss Julia Pastrana
Harvard Theater Collection, The Houghton Library
Figure 7: Celesta Geyer / Dolly Dimples

Figure 8: Mathilde Kschessinska
From "Mathilde Kschessinska."
Figure 9: Tranquil Le Clercq in The Cage, 1955. Photo from the Dance Magazine Archives.

Figure 10: Wendy Whelan in George Balanchine's "Symphony in Three Movements", photo courtesy of New York City Ballet
Chapter Three

Deformed Form: Training the Monstrous Body

“Inherently unstable, the body is always in a paradoxical process of becoming—and becoming undone. As any dancer or athlete will readily admit, the body never reaches a stable location, no matter how disciplined the training. The daily practice required to keep that body ‘in shape’ exposes the body’s instability, its annoying tendency to spill over its appropriate boundaries. Yet at the same time, that daily practice also structures a physical identity of its own making. Simultaneously registering, creating, and subverting cultural conventions, embodied experience is necessarily complex and messy.” —Ann Cooper Albright

In my last chapter, I advanced a theory of monstrosity as a visual categorization of gendered (and raced) amalgamation. Reading bodies that display visible markers of mixture as monstrous focuses our analysis on the relationship between audience and performer—specifically, on the anxieties around gender, race, and nation that spectators project onto these performers. In this chapter, I turn from audience to performer, in order to explore the process of training and technique that produces the monstrous form as a form that is “abnormally developed or grossly deformed.”

This chapter centers on that “abnormal development”—what I call “deformed form”—to extend my reading of the monstrous body of both the freak and the ballerina. Juxtaposing these forms shows us not only that the ballerina might be more deformed, more monstrous, than her idealized image suggests, but also that the freak body might be less a “natural” category, and more a development, a means of

1 Albright, Ann Cooper. “Mining the Dance Field” in Choreographing Difference: The Body and Identity in Contemporary Dance. (Hanover, New Hampshire: Wesleyan University Press, 2010), 5
3 I choose to call this deformed form because I am interested in the way bodies are always simultaneously formed and deformed (or as Albright says, “becoming and becoming undone.” Form implies completion, yet none of our bodies are ever complete. Additionally, as we age, our bodies become deformed. This is a lens that allows me to situate my work in disability studies using a term other than disabled in order to think outside cultural connotations of disability.
training. In this chapter, I develop a method to show that what we take for granted in the ballerina—that her formal technique produces a hyper-able, enviable body—might actually, when read through the figure of the freak, be more grotesque or monstrous than idealized. And, reading in the other direction, what we might take for granted with the freak—the presence of a “natural” bodily disability—is actually trained onto the body, in much the same way that the ballerina perfects her craft. In the end, my method of juxtaposition in this chapter, as in the last chapter, helps us unseat not only the dichotomy between ballerina and freak, but also between monstrous and normate, instead focusing attention to the particularities of training and bodily practice that produce bodily form and intelligibility.

The Dancer’s Daily Routine: Training the Dancer – Machine

Countless articles and interviews give us a glimpse of a day in the life of a ballerina. Non-ballerinas are fascinated by the idea of a day so disciplined, routine, and physical. This life starts young, as young as age three for many ballerinas. Parents across the United States put their (mostly girl) children into ballet class (perhaps as a feminine counterpart to putting a young boy on an athletic team). Many kids drop out eventually; they grow older and their bodies mature and expand, all signs that ballet is not for them. But the women who stick with it train their docile bodies into ballet bodies.

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4 Here, I use Foucault’s definition of docile as that “may be subjected, used, transformed, and improved” (Foucault, “Docile Bodies,” 136). Though this is not exactly the same definition, it is helpful for emphasizing the work ballerinas do on their body. Throughout this chapter, I use a Foucauldian attention to the daily life of a ballerina.
Six days a week, from 10:00 am till 7:00 pm, ballet company members take classes and rehearse. Their days are long and filled with dance classes (both en pointe and in flat ballet slippers) and various other exercising and stretching routines. The aim of classes is to improve technique. Dancers stand at the barre and perform a series of exercises intended to warm up the body. A traditional barre, which is about fifty minutes of a ninety-minute class, will begin with pliés, slight to exaggerated bends in the knees. Pliés begin in first position: the feet are turned out as close to 180 degrees as possible. Good or bad turnout is based on the flexibility of the hips. Turn out also engages the muscles in the leg as one is supposed to turn out from her hips and thus feel the upper thighs constantly drawing towards one another. The knees must track directly over the feet in a plié. Weight should be shared equally between the two feet, not favoring one foot, and the heels of the feet remain grounded during demi pliés and only lift off the ground during the grande plié. The shoulders must remain upright and back and the stomach and buttocks have to be pulled in. The arms are delicate and follow a series of positions, which correspond to those of the feet. There is no release in the upper body. Plié exercises continue in second position, with the feet further apart, sometimes fourth position, with one foot in front of the other, and then fifth position, with the heel of one foot in front of the toes of the other.

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5 All of this disciplining is in preparation for a season. Once the season begins, the days become longer ending around 11:00 pm.
6 Pliés consist of both demi pliés, slight bends, and grand pliés, where one lowers all the way to the ground.
7 Ballet teachers often give the direction that dancers must go “up to go down,” meaning the dancer remains upright even as she bends her knees.
Next are slow tendus followed by fast tendus. Tendus differ from pliés in that the weight is no longer balanced between both feet. One leg must take all of the weight, but make a seamless transition as the other leg extends out in front, to the side, and behind the supporting leg. During tendus the foot is pointed. One must be careful to point the whole foot and not curl the toes or sickle the ankle. Tendus often happen en croix, meaning a cross, in front of the body, to the side of the body, behind the body, and back to the side of the body. The rest of the body must remain engaged in a fixed position. Dégagés are similar to tendus, though are usually faster, and the foot leaves the ground a few inches. Dégagés happen from first and fifth position, and the foot brushes the ground before lifting; these also often happen en croix.

Rond de jambe means “round of the leg” and is a circular movement of the leg either en dehors (clockwise) or en dedans (counterclockwise). Rond de jambes can happen à terre (on the ground) or en l’air (in the air). Rond de jambes à terre begin with a tendu to the front of the body or to the back of the body and continue to draw a circle and then pass through first position back to the starting place. During the rond de jambe en l’air combinations, the leg extends out to 90 degrees and then comes through passé (which literally means “to pass” and occurs when the working leg is pointed at the knee of the standing leg) and extends back out.

During fondues, the standing leg bends as the working leg points in coupe on the ankle, and then, as the working leg extends to the front (devant), side (à la

9 Balanchine is famous for saying that a dancer should be able to rest a glass of water on a pointed foot (Patricia Beaman).
10 “American Ballet Theater – Ballet Dictionary.”
11 Fondues mean “to melt” (“American Ballet Theater – Ballet Dictionary”).
seconde), or back (derrière), the standing leg straightens completely. Frappés begin with the foot in coupé and are quick strikes and extensions of the foot and leg in all three directions. Grands battements are high extensions of the legs, usually above 90 degrees.12 Following barre is a center portion of the class, which is approximately 40-45 minutes.13 Days are spent forming the body.

Because I do not have this background, I spoke with Caroline Shadle about her experience growing up training intensively in ballet. Caroline started dancing at age three doing pre-ballet and has danced ever since. When I asked Caroline when ballet became serious for her, she replied, “I don’t even know if there was a moment when it became serious, but at some point becoming a professional ballerina became the end goal, and there was really no other option…that was where I was going to go.”14

When I asked Caroline to share a painful ballet memory, she responded that the auditions for the summer intensives were the most painful and emotionally intense experiences in her ballet career.15 Interestingly enough, the physical pain she endured throughout the year did not resonate with her as painful – instead the emotional turmoil these auditions caused are what stand out as challenging. During the months of January and February, major companies travel around the United State and hold auditions in big cities for their summer intensives. Caroline would go to between six

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12 In my ballet class, we usually end class with four grande pliés in second facing the barre, but every teacher ends in a different way. Classes also typically incorporate stretching.
13 Center includes an adagio, a tendu / pirouette combination, an across the floor waltz including turns, warm up jumps, petite allegro, and last a grand allegro. This description of the barre portion of a ballet class comes from my own experience with barre classes at Wesleyan University under the instruction of Patricia Beaman. Other ballet teachers may lead a different barre, but I have included it for a structural outline of a typical ballet class.
14 Caroline Shadle, Interview by author, GarageBand recording, Middletown, CT, February, 2015.
15 Between eighth grade and her senior year of high school, Caroline spent every January and February auditioning for summer intensives (Caroline Shadle, Interview).
and eight auditions. At auditions, she would dance with thirty to ninety other girls. Caroline says that she restricted her diet severely at this time, eating only fruit, vegetables, and pretzels, causing her to lose anywhere between five and ten pounds. All of this self-regulation was geared toward manipulating her body into the idealized physical form of a ballerina. Before the audition, Caroline had to submit photographs (most often a photograph of her in first arabesque). She tells me that she “agonized” over these photographs, taking many to make sure her arabesque looked perfect (see Figure 11). At the auditions\(^\text{16}\), she wore a black leotard, pink tights, and a tight bun (much like the iconic image of ballerinas) with a number pinned to her torso. The women in the room all looked the same, conforming to the same rules, further reducing them to numbers. Caroline recalls the School of American Ballet (SAB) audition as particularly stressful because at the beginning of the audition the ballet master walked around the room and “tested” each body before the ballet class even began. He lifted dancers’ legs to the front, side, and into arabesque to get a sense of their flexibility. The ballet master handled their bodies before they were given a chance to demonstrate their skills. Caroline says that this audition ruled out a number of women based purely on their physique, not their technique.

I asked Caroline about her first time dancing en pointe, paradoxically a legendary and painful spectacle typically associated with ballet. She told me that she first went en pointe in sixth grade. She recalls that her first pointe class was on a Saturday after ballet, and a woman from a dance store came to class to fit each dancer

\(^{16}\) The auditions mostly consisted of a ballet class (on flat or in regular ballet slippers) followed by a short pointe section at the end to demonstrate competence en pointe (Caroline Shadle, Interview).
for pointe shoes – to make sure everyone’s looked right. She taught us how to put on our ribbons properly, how to cross them properly, very slowly.” When I asked her if the pointe shoes hurt, Caroline says, “Everyone always asks me that. The thing that hurts is not standing on your toes but that a pointe shoe is so constricting around your foot, so what always hurt for me was my metatarsal area and bunion area.” She explained that she developed corns on her toes from where her toes pressed together and that was the most painful part of pointe. But despite the pain, pointe was an essential part of Caroline’s training. She feels longer and taller, more beautiful en pointe. For Caroline, pointe is beautiful and epitomizes what it means to be a real ballerina.

During Caroline’s junior year of high school, she switched from her childhood studio, Ruth Page, to the Joffrey Ballet Academy of Dance in Chicago. At the Joffrey, she danced Monday through Saturday (after school during the week and during the day on Saturday). After school, she had a 1.5-hour ballet class on flat followed by a pointe, variation, or pas de deux class from 6:30 pm – 8:00 p.m. One or two nights a week, she had an additional rehearsal for the upcoming show. After class, she took the train home, eating only a protein bar for dinner. Throughout these years, Caroline restricted her diet because as she said to me, “That was normal, or ‘normal’ for us,” “us” being ballerinas.

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17 Caroline Shadle, Interview.
18 At the Joffrey, Caroline was in level five of the pre-professional program (which is the highest level before the trainee program) (Caroline Shadle, Interview).
19 Her schedule was packed; she woke up at 6:15 am, completed a regular high school day until 3:00 pm, and then took the train to her father’s office where she did work and ate a small snack until her ballet class started at 5:00 pm. It was expected that students arrive half an hour early to stretch (Caroline Shadle, Interview)
Caroline decided not to pursue ballet professionally at the end of her junior year of high school. Reflecting on her decision, she says,

I wasn’t sure if I wanted to devote every single little tiny ounce of my being to this very self-oriented, self-centered craft and I also realized as a curious person in school I would have to give up that life, probably entirely, and that wasn’t something I was willing to do. I wanted to dance for me and for something that brought me happiness instead of something that was so strict and self-centered...[at Ruth Page] we danced because we loved it and because we loved dancing with one another. I still have times and moments of regret...What if that had been me [dancing professionally]? Could I have done that? There is something incredibly, incredibly special about ballet. Normal people can’t do ballet. It’s not becoming a regular profession. Your life is different; people don’t understand dancers, it [training/technique] sets you apart. I have moments of regret but it is what it is.20

Caroline’s statement that, “normal people can’t do ballet” struck a chord with me.

“Normal people” can’t be freaks either. Watching Caroline dance, I am reminded that Caroline is first and foremost a technician. Her movements exist within the very rigorous and stringent lexicon that makes up the ballet world. She walks with her feet turned out, even at the grocery store. This signature reflects an impression of the training she has endured for most of her life. Though she is not necessarily a ballerina off stage, she is the training to which she has devoted her life. Her body is shaped into a precise, highly unnatural form by this training.

**The Ballerina and the Fat Lady: Freaks as Trained / Weight as Training**

Take, by way of contrast the Fat Lady, a well-known freak show act. I introduced her gender performance in Chapter Two, analyzing her as monstrous because she is feminine and yet takes up space; erotic yet undesirable; womanly, yet

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20 Caroline Shadle Interview
childlike. She is a “human oddity” because she existed in contrast to ideals of Victorian Femininity and represents excess, loss of control, and an appetite (both for food and for sex) that were not socially permitted for women during the 19th and 20th centuries and to this day. Her appetite for sex, inappropriate for women, paradoxically desexualizes her body. She is also monstrous because she is feminine and because she takes up space. She is monstrous because of her ability to make spectators desire her, thus, challenging societal standards about beauty and sex. The Fat Lady’s performance capitalizes on a physical difference, but does not ask us to view her fatness as a result of “personal dysfunction and overeating,” but rather as a “transgressive female appetite.”

Here, I want to explore the creation of her fatness, weight as a kind of training. The physical matter of Fat Ladies’ bodies is essential to their performances. Fatness is about excess. Historically, fatness was a sign of wealth and fertility. As beauty aesthetics changed, women no longer desire excess weight to prove their fertility. Fat is an aesthetic that we have divorced from beautiful, a quality directly related to femininity. Fatness morphs into a fear, something women, in particular, work to avoid. We saw in Chapter Two the ways in which the Fat Lady is grotesque because she is both masculine and feminine, but she is further mixed; she is desirable and fat. Performances of thinness such as the ballet help us imagine fatness as a

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21 Bogdan, 29.
22 Mary Russo says, “fatness and bodily excess of various kinds are not often thought of in passive, individual, more merely descriptive terms and, indeed, as Ellmann shows, fat women in the United States particularly, are repositories of shame and repressed desire” (Russo, 24).
23 Mazer, 258.
24 Ibid.
25 Fat Ladies must enact a certain performativity; their performance is not just of a physical quality but rather an exaggeration of stereotypes associated with that quality. Russo says, “fatness has both a constitutive and a performative aspect: it contributes to definitions of femaleness and to class, although it is not essentially or exclusively class or gender-bound” (Russo, 24).
“woeful lack of self control and self discipline,” particularly on the part of fat women as they are expected to be docile, domestic, and disciplined. In fact, it is this conception of fatness that helps create the image of the ballerina as highly disciplined. With this in mind, we may struggle to view fatness as something that we must train our bodies to attain. We view fat as equivalent to failure for women; we see fat as the opposite of training or self-care. When we speak of the work we enact on our bodies, we talk about exercise as activity that counteracts calorie intake. The Fat Lady must, not unlike the ballerina, train her body to be fat.

Performances of womanhood that are deemed “monstrous” are based in the very same origin on which survival depends; we must consume and reproduce to survive. A certain amount of flesh is required for fertility, but historically, medical professionals did not want women having more than body mass than necessary. They can have just enough. Women and fat people are ostracized because of eating; an action that fuels life. The actions that sustain us are the same actions that constitute monstrosity. Can we understand fat as something that requires training and discipline just as ballerinas instruct their bodies to execute specific performances?

Drawing on the training of the ballerina, I want to foreground the fact that maintaining a fat body requires work. Instead of considering the ways in which fatness is an example of a lack of control, we must consider the following questions: “How much does [the fat lady] have to eat to sustain her weight?” To what other

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26 Mazer, 259.
27 Russo, 23; also note the body “as an exaggerated sign for what is life-embracing—the drive to survive by consuming and reproducing—also carried, in performance, the signs of something monstrous” (Mazer, 258).
28 Ibid., 258.
29 Ibid., 260.
forms of training does she subject her body in order to be the fat lady? What other tricks does she perform that are not expected of her? In what ways is the fat lady erotic and powerful? Mazer says that the “trick” the fat lady performs is “herself,” suggesting that her performance is entirely based on her body; however, I believe that this contradicts her idea that the Fat Lady is “acting as much as she is being.” In fact, as I showed in the last chapter, the Fat Lady’s display, while heavily reliant on her body, is performative (dependent on her clothing, posture, comportment style); in this chapter, I will suggest that it is also just as disciplined as the bodily training of the ballerina.

Training produces an ideal form through technique and bodily sculpting. In this section, I bring the definition of training and technique that ballet provides to my reading of the fat lady, the bearded lady, and freaks more generally. Let us consider how these performances might also reflect training, technique, and discipline as much as, or perhaps more than, natural bodily differences.

The figure of the fat woman works to literally “abject,” by way of her abjected body, those disavowed aspects of production and “dangers of overproduction.” This abjection constitutes a hard and hidden work—a work that is easily misrecognized as the very overconsumption it is designed to hide. This labor of the freshly sign is the semiotic “work-in” of female bodies marked by class and race which subsidizes the “work-out” of their more mobile (exercised) and affluent neighbors.

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30 Ibid., 258
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid., 262
33 Russo, 24
Mary Russo is drawing on Catherine Gallagher’s work on “the large body.” Russo theorizes that the abjection of the fat body is hard and hidden work, work that the form of the abjected body itself conceals. Imagining, in other words, that the grotesqueness of the fat body is a natural or inherent quality of the body disguises the (cultural, social) production of grotesqueness. Further, this concealment, one that is “marked by class and race,” is as Russo argues, subsidized by “their more mobile (exercised) and affluent neighbors.” The forms of exercise and body work of the thin helps obscure and naturalize the work that large bodies do. By juxtaposing the training of the ballerina with the Fat lady, I hope to dislodge these forms of misrecognition, so that we can expand our definition of work beyond the exercise we only imagine in relation to certain bodies, and instead view work as bodily training and sculpting more generally. In this way, we are all constantly working on our body; our techniques, however, are not always as formal or refined as the performers in the freak show and the ballet.

Let us return for a moment to Katy Dierlam’s performance of Helen Melon, a fat lady at the Coney Island Freak Show. Figure 12 shows Katy Dierlam resting backstage at the Coney Island Sideshow. This further associates fatness with ideas of stillness or lack of movement; she is sitting, sleeping, not moving. But of course, she is not passive. We can, as I did in the last chapter, explore how Dierlam herself

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34 Ibid., 187, Notes, 10.
35 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick says “the representational labor of the large body is a kind of “employment” from which is extracted a double and contradictory value: “visible on the one hand in this scene, as a disruptive embolism in the flow of economic circulation, the fat female body functions on the other hand…as the very emblem of that circulation. Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky and Moon, Michael, “Divinity: A Dossier, a Performance Piece, a Little-Understood Emotion” in Discourse: Theoretical Studies in Media and Culture vol. 13 no. 1 (Fall-Winter 1990-1991),14. “The dialogue between Moon and Sedgwick goes a distance in circulating the sign of the fat woman outside the dominant representational economy as a borrowed or donated signifier” (Russo, 188, Notes, 10).
performs monstrous femininity, by juxtaposing contradictory signs of femininity on her body. But we can also, drawing on what we know about ballet training, ask what work she does on her body to portray the ideal Fat Lady. What kinds of training goes into creating the Fat Lady? How much work did Dierlam do on her body to create this image of herself? What rules does she have to follow each day to maintain her figure?

Text from her performance, below, demonstrate Melon’s fatness as work on her body and problematize this notion of fatness as accidental or natural. Melon tells us, “Fat is the dirtiest word in the English language. Yeah. Fat people are ugly and stupid and lazy and probably smelly too. And if you believe that, you’d better stay away from me. I have to be on constant guard against dwindling. And I am, folks.”

Dierlam says, “I have to be on constant guard against dwindling.” This is the essence of the Fat Lady’s technique. She must eat to maintain her weight; losing weight would jeopardize her form, and ability to perform. This statement can be understood in direct relation to Caroline’s earlier comments about eating only pretzels, fruit, and vegetables to keep weight off her body. Overconsumption and underconsumption, like the sub- and the super-human, the specimen and the sylph, are in our gendered cultural imaginary, opposed. But, they are both forms of bodily training, of work on the body that molds and forms the body into specific forms, to comply with certain ideals.

Dierlam addresses directly the work that must take place to make her performance possible. Mazer aptly points out that she “explicitly reverses the values

36 Mazer, 264.
37 Note: we do not have much information about other forms of training, in part because, as I am arguing, we do not tend to see maintaining fat as work. This silence in the historical (and contemporary) record is one I aim to query.
associated with the effort to create and maintain a slender body, the demand of diets
that not only perpetually resist the nourishment that food so obviously represents but
also constrain all distasteful, unfeminine manifestations of appetite.”

We forget that disciplining our bodies does not always make our bodies smaller or thinner. Eating
and maintaining a large body also requires training and regulation. By addressing this
directly in her performance, Dierlam asks the audience to reconsider this fact.

Dierlam must eat in order to maintain her form. In fact, eating can and should be
viewed through the lens of training. If training, as the Oxford English Dictionary tells
us, is “physical preparation of oneself or another for athletic or sporting competition;
engegment in a programme to enhance fitness or bodily appearance,”

then eating is to the Fat Lady as ballet technique is to the ballerina. Both are the modes through
which the bodies are physically prepared for a performance (athletic or sporting
competition).

As I have argued throughout this thesis, reading usually opposing forms
together (sylph and specimen, thin and fat) helps undercut and de-naturalize the
logics that dichotomize these forms. As scholars in fat studies have argued, eating
and appetite are central to our organization of gender. Susan Bordo, in Unbearable

38 Mazer, 264.
40 The full description of training is: sustained instruction and practice (given or received) in an art,
profession, occupation, or procedure, with a view to proficiency in it, physical preparation of oneself
or another for athletic or sporting competition; engagement in a programme to enhance fitness or
bodily appearance, discipline and instruction (given or received) for development of character,
behavior, or ability; education, rearing, bringing up.” Oxford English Dictionary.
41 See Braziel, Jana Evans, and Kathleen LeBesco, eds. Bodies out of bounds: Fatness and
Transgression. (Univ of California Press, 2001); also see Tischner, Irmgard. Fat Lives: a Feminist
Weight,\textsuperscript{42} argues that normative femininity is understood as lack and restraint. Bordo writes:

The representation of unrestrained appetite as inappropriate for women, the depiction of female eating as a private, transgressive act, make restriction and denial of hunger central features of the construction of femininity and set up the compensatory binge as a virtual inevitability. Such restrictions on appetite, moreover, are not about food intake. Rather, the social control of female hunger operates as a practical “discipline” (to use Foucault’s term) that trains female bodies in the knowledge of their limits and possibilities. Denying oneself food becomes the central micro-practice in the education of feminine self-restraint and containment of impulse.\textsuperscript{43}

If, as she argues, “restriction and denial of hunger” are “central features of the construction of femininity,” a form of practical bodily discipline, this helps us understand how the ballerina might still be associated with femininity, regardless of her masculinized or androgynous body. The ballerina’s denial, hunger, control, and discipline help to construct her femininity.\textsuperscript{44} Not only is she disciplined in her training and technique, but also her body is a visual representation of that discipline as she is thin and, therefore, reflects back to the audience her own practice, self-restraint and containment of impulse.

This idea, however, that thinness is feminine and inherently the opposite of fat does not consider fat as a performance of training, but instead views fat as a kind of disfigurement, grotesqueness, or monstrous body. I have already insisted that we counteract this notion of fatness. My analysis of the Fat Lady (a role that is characterized by its oxymoronic possibilities) asks audience members to consider the...

\textsuperscript{42} Bordo, \textit{Unbearable Weight}.

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 130.

\textsuperscript{44} Here I use Foucault’s definition of “discipline.”
Fat Lady using our understanding of a ballerina’s training. In order to further understand ballet and the freak show together, we must not oppose monstrosity and training; the two can coexist. Training can produce grotesqueness and monstrous bodies.

Ultimately, Dierlam asks her audience to consider her desirability. This is because “she is not the victim of some obscure body chemistry; rather, she wants to be fat. She has chosen her body. Her obesity is the visible sign of her self-willed attainment of her own desires.” The Fat Lady confronts her audience’s perceptions of her from the moment she enters the stage and challenges their judgments of her by verbalizing the work and effort she puts into her performance. This is not something that all fat people do, of course; this is a very specific performance of a Fat Lady (it is said that Dolly Dimples performed a similarly confrontational routine). Both the Fat Lady and the Ballerina combine forms of erotic and non-erotic, desirable and repellant femininity in their performances. On stage, both figures are spectacles of bodily technique, monstrous women whose sexuality, gender, and embodiment is scrutinized as it is performed. But thinking about both ballet training and Fat Lady training as work one does on one’s body allows us to disrupt assumptions that the freak body is a naturally monstrous body. Instead, the ballerina and the freak are both bodies that have been trained into the monstrous from they perform.

45 Mazer, 264
46 Ibid.
Developing Grotesqueness: Ballet as Monstrous

Above, I use the daily routine of the dancer to open up a new reading of the training of the Fat Lady’s body. Here, I invite us to think about grotesqueness and monstrosity (terms that I defined in the previous chapter and are often connected with the Fat Lady) as they pertain to the ballet. The training that ballet dancers undergo may be understood as grotesque, but our valorization of their training (as a sign of femininity) distances their bodies from the Fat Lady. Yet, ballerinas also train their bodies into a “deformed form.”

Ballerinas go through extensive training before they can perform for a living. The opening of this chapter gives a small glimpse into the life ballerinas must lead. Most professional ballerinas begin their training before the age of ten,[48] as ballet training employs “a conditioning model of learning where repeated muscular effort facilitate[s] the body’s adaption of ideal postures.”[49] This kind of adaptive training helps reshape the body into a particular form.

We have come to understand technique and training as something that elevates our bodies; we associate technique and training with being fit so that bodies respond in predictable ways to our learned movements whether those include running, jumping, or standing in the five positions that are the basis of ballet training. The Oxford English Dictionary has many definitions for the word technique; the first defines technique as “the formal or practical aspect of any art, occupation, or field…

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more generally: way of doing something.”

This definition allows us to think of technique as essential to any occupation, sidelining an emphasis on high arts or idealized body forms. Technique is a routinized mode of bodily conditioning. Training and technique are the means by which we work to achieve ideals and sculpt bodies into the bounds of visual legibility; in order to occupy certain forms, we may sometimes deform our bodies in the process.

Specific bodily categories carry with them certain ideals. Susan Foster refers to the ballet body as “a body-of-ideas” since “dances have bodies with particular skills, but they are also the embodiment of particular aesthetic ideas and ideals.”

This conformity forces dances to be continually unsatisfied with the form of their bodies and fuels their disciplined work in rehearsals; hence, the emphasis on training to be a ballerina. The word “ideal” works twofold as it pertains to the body of the ballerina; the ideal body is able to perform the ballet lexicon, but this body is different from ideal female bodies. Ballet is an art that values a very specific physique. George Balanchine described the ideal physicality of a ballerina as “tall and long-legged, with small heads.”

A commonly understood “ballerina body” is an “ectomorphic [body], with a low percentage of body fat, well-balanced proportions, long slender, straight limbs, narrow hips, and well-developed arches.” This body serves as a direct opposite to the Fat Lady in the freak show who is displayed because of her high percentage of fat, limbs that appear to be shortened because of their excess skin, and wide hips, but it is also distinct from a normative female body.

53 Batson, 17.
Ballet training relies on the idea that the human shape is not only malleable, but also that, given the correct genetic predisposition, the “ideal body can be created.” Many dancers view their bodies as a “manageable machine,” a body that can be transformed through training. The movement we enact shapes our bodies. In this sense, we are all constantly dancing and training, but what ballet serves as a lens where we can zoom in on rigid training and examine closely the way the body can be transformed through repetition. Ballet culture advances a particular (and non-normative) ideal of beauty through discipline and physical suffering. Batson says that the responsibility to care for one’s body is often ignored as “dance training has traditionally focused on the body as a concrete object to be physically mastered.” Dancers view their bodies as objects to be mastered; sometimes, bodies are trained so extensively that they begin to inhabit different norms from the ones previously adopted.

In ballet, technique is essential and depends on disciplining the body into what I call deformed form. As a dancer, I notice that we are quick to comment on each other’s bodies. Dancers are obsessed with our form and technique. We determine if a ballerina has good technique based on the control and restraint she can exercise over her body. Bad technique is noticeable and shameful; bad technique disqualifies women and men from dancing professionally. Ballerinas spend their lives attempting to perfect a technique (and a body) that is “based on the turn out of the hip

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55 Ibid., 14.
56 Ibid.
57 I use de/forming rather than dis/abling because I believe it is a more appropriate description of the way ballet technique alters a body. I also believe it encompasses all bodies because its cultural connotation is different.
(emphasizing the display of the body) and the five positions of the feet established by Beauchamp, together with the straight spine, the high held chest, the elegantly carried head and arms and the scrupulously arched feet of the French Courtier. While this body form requires certain physiological characteristics (if women have inflexible hips, a career in ballet is unlikely), this is also a body subject to very specific aesthetic ideals, a body that requires conditioning to transform and regularize, so as to conform “with dance training requirements” and with those of other ballerinas in the company.

Because bodies serve “as the dancer’s instrument,” dancers want to feel autonomy over their technique. Their bodies are their careers, so there is a lot at stake when bodies don’t act in predictable, reliable ways. Training helps dancers maintain mastery over their muscles by repeating motions over and over again. Additionally, training may expand the movement potential of a body. Ballet training makes dancers strong, yet simultaneously makes their performances appear effortless. Thiseffortlessness is produced when dancers have worked long enough that their bodies are retrained into certain habits that become reliable and predictable.

The beauty of ballet is created by the straight lines of the extended human body going outward and upward and by the artificiality of the movements. Ballet dancers produce a spectacle in which upward aspiring straight lines and an illusion of weightlessness are central elements. Yet because “human bodies do not consist of straight lines and they are inevitability subject to the law of gravity,” training becomes essential as a way to “bridge the gap” between the “body-of-ideas of ballet and the material body of a dancer.”

59 Ibid., 15
60 Ibid., 16.
62 Ibid.
63 Ibid.
However, while this disciplining of the body makes dancers believe that their bodies are regularized machines, training does not protect the dancer in the long run, and the training, itself, ironically, may “precipitate or perpetuate injury.”

Indeed, it often does. Many dancers become desensitized to pain and to any other signs from their bodies because injury can ruin their careers. I am interested in looking at pain, however, as an indication of the grotesque rather than condemning ballet for producing pain. Ballet trains the body to contort into abnormal positions, from standing on one’s toes (in pointe shoes) to extreme turn out of the hips. In the case of pointe shoes, since “human toes were not designed to stand on” ballerinas frequently break their toes. And, because it is not uncommon for ballerinas to dance on broken toes, the attitude they develop “toward pain and injuries is hazardous.”

Most dance injuries are “the result of chronically overburdening the body.” This suggests that the trouble with ballet training is not only the movement ballerinas are trained to do but also the ways in which they are instructed to disregard pain. As Aalten points out the mode of training of the body creates “ambivalence”; the ballerina’s body loses its materiality and becomes an ideal.

While pain typically signals that something is wrong, as dancers become disassociated from their bodies, they learn to ignore the pain and move “toward self-concealment that allows for the possibility of neglect[ing their bodies].” But even as

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64 Batson, 18.
66 Ibid.
67 Ibid., 110.
68 “because pain is often ignored, a minor physical problem eventually turns into a serious one.” (Aalten, 110).
71 Ibid., 111.
dancers experience pain, “the ultimate illusion is that of a perfect dancing body—one completely unhampered by sweat, pain, or the evidence of any physical negotiation with gravity.”\(^\text{72}\) Pain is so central to the ballet that the “suffering that [is] involved in the process is considered to be necessary and even somewhat heroic.”\(^\text{73}\) It is not just teachers and choreographers who demand that dancers grow accustomed to pain, but also the spectators whose pleasure depends on the otherworldly, super-human feats of disembodied grace.

In order to maintain the body, eating disorders are extremely common among ballerinas. Dancers frequently skip meals, and many reach a point in their career where they hate eating.\(^\text{74}\) The consequences of not eating while exerting so much physical effort are serious; many ballet dancers become extremely sick, collapsing from hunger and, in some severe cases, even jeopardizing their ability to reproduce.\(^\text{75}\) Many ballerinas do not feel hunger, as they do not feel pain; both techniques produce the ballerina as a “disembodied woman” who exists outsider her tangible body.\(^\text{76}\) Yet as we saw in the discussion of the Fat Lady, the control of hunger is a physical result of training. While training works to build muscle memory, it also controls appetite, hunger: ballerinas are trained, then, not to be hungry. It seems contradictory that a profession that places such intense emphasis on the body would treat it so poorly; yet, this is where the harmfulness of the “aesthetic ideal” is most evident. It is to this

\(^{73}\) Aalten, “Listening to the Dancer’s Body,” 122.
\(^{74}\) Aalten, “Listening to the Dancer’s Body,” 118.
\(^{76}\) Aalten, “Listening to the Dancer’s Body,” 114.
“aesthetic ideal” that the ballerina directs her training, forming and deforming her body in the process.

I do not wish to condemn ballet for producing pain or injury, however; instead, I want to suggest that ballet training disciplines the body into a deformed form that is grotesque, monstrous. I have included an image taken by Henry Leutwyler77 of a ballerina’s foot (see Figure 13). This image is grotesque; her foot is deformed. It is positioned, however, directly next to a deformed foot concealed by the form of a pointe shoe. This masking of deformity allows us to understand why ballerinas are not categorized as grotesque onstage, even if off stage, their bodies certainly are grotesque. The ballerina is seen as a “sylph like creature who transcends her own material body to provide a tantalizingly elusive vision of the spectator’s desire”78; she spends most of her time “upright,” which “carries a heavy moral valence” of “goodness, mobility, achievement, [and] mastery over nature’s forces.”79 However, the ballerina’s training produces the ideal form as a deformed form. Understanding this codependence of form and deformity allows us to uncover grotesqueness on the ballerina’s body. In contrast to how we might wish to see this body (as hyper-able, as beautiful, as sylph-like), the ballerina’s body is a body in pain, a suffering body. This then draws the ballerina much closer to the figure of a freak than would originally be apparent; both are grotesque.

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78 Albright, “Moving Across Difference: Dance and Disability,” 56.
79 Batson, 16.
In our oppositional discourse, ballerinas represent goodness and achievement while freaks represent “absolute alieness.” But perhaps both forms are better thought of as monstrous, deformed forms that require specific modes of training and technique. Indeed, examining the freak performance as trained and ballet training as deforming helps unsettle these dichotomies, drawing our attention to the ways spectators are trained to view freaks as naturally disabled and monstrous, and ballerinas as highly trained and beautiful. In ballet; the ballerina represents a “visual ideal” that supersedes the ballet world and is representative of a visual ideal of modern culture: thinness, control, and a disciplined female body. This ideal enfreaks obesity, helping us to imagine that the freak body is out of control, undisciplined, natural, or primitive. When we consider the freak show in this light, we see that it as an art form depends on a display of specific and strange bodies that conform to particular deformed forms, forms that are viewed as other, and that confirm a notion of disability that elevates spectators above performers. And we can return to the ballerina to see that her body, her disability or deformity, is not scrutinized or visualized in the same way. However disabling her practices may be, a ballerina escapes the category of disability because of the way she performs a disciplined femaleness; this also helps produce ballet as a high art.

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80 Garland Thomson, Extraordinary Bodies, 16.
81 We might also view these bodies as “disabled,” understanding disability as the ways in which bodies labeled culturally deformed are rendered disabled. Though my work does not set out to categorize ballerinas (or freak show performers) as disabled, I think it is important to acknowledge disability as it characterizes much of the freak show. Garland Thomson addresses disability in direct relation to able-bodiedness and poses the two as “conceptual opposite[s]” and self evident physical conditions.” With this definition in mind, both freak show performers and ballerinas can be read as “disabled” bodies but most contemporary scholarship is hesitant to place ballerinas in the category of disabled and too easily renders freaks disabled (Garland Thomson, Extraordinary Bodies, 6).
Training and Performance: The Bearded Lady’s Work

For most of this chapter, I have considered relatively straightforward forms of training—eating and exercise—in order to argue that might read monstrosity of both the freak performer and the ballerina as a form of bodily technique. Now, in my final reading, I want to bring together my argument in the last chapter with my argument in this chapter, to illustrate how a method of juxtaposing the freak and ballet performances might open up new questions about form, deformity, beauty, and monstrosity. Technique and training are ways to think through the “deformed form” into which both ballerinas and freak show performers shape their bodies. The ways in which I read training onto the Bearded Lady are more tentative, less definitive than the Fat Lady eating or the ballet dancer doing pliés at the barre—the point is that evidence of this kind of bodily training might be absent from the historical record not because it does not exist, but because training and technique are not how we have been encouraged to understand or view the freak body. Still, as I have argued throughout, the ballerina’s training helps us ask questions of freak show performers—even when we don’t have the answers.

In the previous chapter, I analyzed the Bearded Lady as a monstrous figure due to her portrayal of gender ambiguity. In order to be the Bearded Lady, one must fit into a very specific form. First, the person must be a woman, but she also must have a beard. Bearded Ladies’ show names were also specifically chosen to “achieve a certain tone that showmen sought.” Some famous names included. “Lady Olga,

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82 Bearded Ladies were closely speculated in order to verify their authenticity. Bogdan says, “whether the person behind the beard was really a woman was a question that generated much speculation and publicity” (Bogdan, 226).
83 Ibid.
Madame Devere, Princess Gracie.” All of these names have prefixes that elevate the Ladies to courtly womanhood, sharpening the discord their beards represent.

Womanhood, too, imbues her movements. When she walks, she must be careful not to take up too much space. She must be graceful. In some performances, she dances; other times she combs her long hair in the mirror. All of these gestures are ones that she enacts in order to perform recognizable modes of femininity. Her hair has to be long and her beard must be thick and full. The Bearded Lady displays markers of Victorian womanhood and femininity, alongside the masculine marker of the beard. Robert Bogdan says, “except for the beards, these women represented the quintessence of refined respectable womanhood.” This gender ambiguity is what, as I argued in the last chapter, produces her performance as monstrous.

Bearded Ladies are spectacles because they combine recognizable forms of gender on their bodies. As Judith Butler argues, gender is a performance of a sexed body; gendered “acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means.” She goes on, stating, “that the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality.”

Bearded ladies garner attention because they transgress typically understood lines of gender performances; at the same time, since they have “no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute [their] reality,” they do not fit nicely within a

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84 Ibid.
85 Ibid., 224.
86 Butler, Gender Trouble, 136.
87 Ibid.
binary gender system. The performance of the Bearded Lady is a performance that confuses and crosses culturally understood markers of femininity and masculinity.

The Bearded Lady’s training, then, is twofold; she must perform legible gender while also transgressing it, through amalgamation. And, like the ballerina, she must train her body so that her “natural attributes” take on specific, cultural forms. In this case, the Bearded Lady must grow her beard. The ability to grow facial hair may be the only “natural” element of her performance, just as the ballerina cannot change the shape of her head no matter how intensive her training. In *Fair Bosom/Black Beard: Facial Hair, Gender Determination, and the Strange Career of Madame Clofullia,* “Bearded Lady,” Sean Trainor states,

it was [a bearded lady’s decision] (however unfreely made) not to remove [her beard] that prompted questions about her identity. But such a conception of sex and gender also reminds us of the limits of agency—how particular bodily characteristics circumscribe the range of behaviors a person can perform without facing disciplinary consequences.88

Here, we can look at training in two ways. The expected training in this circumstance would be hair removal to fit within legible boundaries of gender recognition. A woman with a beard could pluck, tweeze, wax, and remove hair consistently throughout her life to avoid transgression and remain legible; this is the simple work on the body that we expect of all people. However, the Bearded Lady’s work is more complicated than that.

Training, as I have defined it, is the work one does on one’s body to mold it into specific forms. For the performers I am considering, training is all consuming; it is a way of life that dictates the path one must take to become successful. In ballet,

88 Trainor, 553-554.
that path is defined by certain physical requirements and abilities that are trained onto the body: flexible hips, high leg extensions, and low body fat. For the Fat Lady, the path is one of eating, guarding against dwindling, and developing postures and modes of comportment that highlight particular parts of the body, and the fat body’s shape. The Bearded Lady must cultivate on her body signs of both masculinity and femininity. She must grow, trim, and maintain her beard. She must also have a husband and be a wife as “being married and a devoted wife was the epitome of womanhood—which is what bearded women’s presentation proclaimed them to be.”

In order to produce the necessary amalgamation, heterosexual marriage—becoming a wife—is a central component of the Bearded Lady’s discipline, her occupational path. Her performance is crafted and trained intentionally—like that of the ballerina. Might we, then, read the Bearded Lady’s performance as a drag performance following Judith Butler’s analysis? In a way, the performances I have described throughout this research each read like drag: a form that dresses up one gender with another, playing with distinctions between sex and gender. The Bearded Lady asks us to look at her beard in relation to her bust. She does not hide the performance of one gender in order to enact another; rather, she wears many cultural markers at once. The Bearded Lady pushes back against cultural desires of identity where “coherence is desired, wished for, idealized” and instead performs the opposite of coherence, in this case gender illegibility, on her body. Yet, in Gender Trouble, Butler encourages her reader to consider drag as a lens for understanding the ways in which all gender is performative. Drag “is not an appropriation of gender that assumes gender belongs to

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89 Bogdan, 224.
sex;” instead, it is a metaphor for the “mundane way in which all genders are appropriated, theatricized, worn, [and] done.” Is this true, too, of these performers? How might reading training and technique back into the Bearded Lady to help us see that all bodies have the potential to occupy monstrous form, if we put pressure on the cultural ideals that, instead, help us keep apart freak and ballerina, monster and sylph?

Locating the work that the Bearded Lady does on her body as training allows us to explore how each one of these performers employs a certain technique to entertain, awe, and confuse audiences. Training produces the deformed form of the performer, but it also creates the visual ideals that help ensure the audience’s proper understanding of the performance. Juxtaposing these forms gives us new entry points into the theorization of both the freak show and the ballet. We can see that the ballerina is a deformed form; she is monstrous not only because of her gender performance but also because of her technique. The freak performer, too, is a deformed form: monstrous because of her gender, but also her technique. These juxtapositions help us rethink the norms of gender that stabilize binary identities and further heterosexuality.

We all enact work on our bodies. All gender is a performance; we develop techniques to be legible, and thus, we all have a potential for monstrosity. Opposing monstrosity and normalcy, then, is problematic because the potential for becoming monstrous through training is one that is a potential for us all. De-naturalizing the forms of the freak and the ballerina encourages us to understand all bodies as

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90 Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” 312.
91 Ibid., 313.
92 This is taken from gender theorists – gender itself is not natural. It is trained, enacted, and read through cultural ideals.
disciplined, shaped, and formed; it forces us to confront the way that conforming to cultural norms and categories requires intensive training and work. My point is not that the freak show performer and the ballerina are *normal*, nor that all bodies train themselves into these kinds of monstrous forms, but rather that it is our cultural insistence on dichotomizing the freak from the ballerina, the specimen from the sylph, the sub- from the super-human that helps produce the idea that it is only some bodily forms that are naturally, and pathologically, other. As I hope I have demonstrated juxtaposing and connecting these forms might, instead, denaturalize not only the freak and the ballerina, but also the normate/spectator who is usually exempt from such scrutiny.
Figure 11: Photograph of Caroline Shadle (courtesy of Caroline Shadle)

Figure 12: Katie/Helen Melon ©1992 Fred Kahl.
Figure 13: Photograph by Henry Leutwyler from Photo Essay published by NYMagazine
From Theory to Performance

This section concludes Part I of my thesis. The first three chapters comprise the theoretical underpinnings of my argument. In Part I of my thesis, I used a combination of methods to juxtapose the freak show and the ballet. In Chapter One, I traced the distinct histories of the freak show and the ballet, drawing attention to the way the space, stage, and gaze creates different classed experiences for the spectator. In Chapter Two, I read images of female freak show performers alongside ballerinas, drawing attention to the way each form reflects modes of visual monstrosity, primarily through the amalgamation of gendered ideals, but also in terms of race, nation, and sexuality. In Chapter Three, I turned my attention to training, technique, discipline, and practice in both forms, drawing on a Foucauldian reading of the bodily discipline of a ballerina in order to recast the training of a freak performer’s body.

When we read gender in the ballet using our understanding of gendered ambiguity gleaned from the freak show, we are able to move beyond ballet as a hyper-feminine performance and locate the ways in which the ballerina’s body is androgynous, ambiguous, monstrous, and grotesque. This allows us to pay closer attention to corporeality, rather than to gendered ideals. When we read the freak show using our understanding of ballet training, we are able to move beyond conceptions of the freak body as naturally different, or disabled. The idea of the freak body as a trained body destabilizes the distinctions between natural and disabled, hyper-abled and trained. In fact, reading the freak show performances as trained, technical performances begs us to let go of the category “normal” all together and instead explore all bodies as constructions that are constantly in the process of being formed.
and deformed. We leave this section with an analysis of monstrosity as the visual categorization of amalgamation present on both the freak performer and the ballerina, and an understanding that these two performers represent a “deformed form” that renders each an appealing spectacle.

In Part II, I take on embodied elements of my thesis. While I have paid careful attention throughout the thesis to the corporeality of bodies (in part because I am a dancer), in this second section, I contextualize the two dances I have choreographed for the Dance component of my thesis, continuing my embodied methodology. Dance provides the final methodological component to enact these complex corporealities that I have thus far described and analyzed in *Monstrous Form.*
Chapter Four

The Freak Show, the Ballet, and Modern Dance – Writing Embodied Experiences

“Early in their lives, dancers learn the meaning of the word “work”: it is the repetitious execution of demanding exercises in daily technique classes. It is what they do to improve their turns; lift their legs; rise to their toes...But when dancers pick up their dance bags and go home, they leave no record of what they have done. Though the physical changes accomplished through training and rehearsal are recorded in the bodies of individual dancers as they grow stronger, develop muscle tone, and train the neural pathways to accomplish a particularly challenging movement, the execution of the dancer that manifests this growth leaves no trace. The history of dancers’ real work, then, is accessible only through secondary accounts. Rarely have the changes and developments in dance been examined through the lived bodies of the individuals who transform the art.” -- Karen Eliot

My work is a joint American Studies and Dance thesis. Because of this, I spent a significant part of this research process choreographing two dances that are embodied, visual iterations of the work that I have outlined in Part I. Over the past year, I created two twelve-minute pieces, which explore different themes illuminated in my research and which serve as primary sources for my thesis. In this chapter, I will discuss the concepts behind each piece, the rehearsal processes, the dancers, and the performances. It was hugely beneficial to create dance work as a part of this process because it enabled me to focus attention on actual, physical, moving bodies while I theorized about norms, bodies, form, deformity, hyper-ability, technique, and training.

The Karen Eliot quotation with which I open this chapter, summarizes the valorization of dance training that I discussed in Chapter Three. It also speaks to the importance of embodied experiences. I want to reiterate that though training has not

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previously served as a means to understanding the work of freak show performers, it is important to read freak show performances as highly trained. We have historically acknowledged freak show performances as spectacle based on inherent disability. I push back against this through the entirety of the work as my own reading of the freak show comes from my training as a dancer.

I, then, preface this chapter with my own gaze. I acknowledge that much of my research has included reading bodies in a way that I, myself, am always conscious of being read. This means that a lot of my work centers around ideals we create for our own bodies as we try desperately to shape them to fit within the dance world. I can only hope, however, that this close attention to bodies will ask us consider embodied experiences more centrally as we continue to theorize about the body. My choreography does not represent or appropriate the embodied experience of a freak show performer; to do so, or to say I was trying to do so, takes away from the particularity of their embodied experience. What my work does try to do is bridge the gap, to create language and movement for understanding all kinds of work, technique, and training, and to dive into an embodied experience developed alongside a conceptual framework.

**My Dancing and Body Narrative**

In my Introduction, I discussed the ways in which this thesis stemmed from my own experiences with form and deformity (or what I have now labeled deformed form). At Wesleyan, I rediscovered dance. Before coming here, many doors were closed to me, as I did not have a foundational training in ballet. Yet, at Wesleyan, I found a place where I could dance without the training that I had lacked for so long.
For me, technique and training have always been a lack; an infrastructure mandated for dancers that I did not have. As a child, I was involved in a variety of activities, including ballet, but was never interested in limiting my participation in other after school activities to pursue ballet seriously. Additionally, I have always been too short and too curvy to be a ballerina. I was also incredibly flat footed; my feet are not built for pointe shoes.

My body plagued much of my dancing life as did my ability or what felt like a disability and inability to form my body into a “dancer’s body.” All of this led to disordered eating that made me feel freakish and othered in ballet classes. I did not fit within a form, and though even at age eight, I was already conscious of my calorie intake and subsisted on mostly pineapple, I could not stop my body from taking its shape and leaving behind my hopes and dreams of becoming a ballerina. I grew up studying modern dance, training in Isadora Duncan and with Ellen Robbins at Dance Theater Workshop. Dance was always part of my life, but unlike Caroline Shadle, the ballerina I feature in Chapter Two, it was never going to be my career because I was not “made for it” and I knew it.

I left ballet behind when I was thirteen. As a teenager with body image constantly on my mind, the ballet world was toxic and made me feel inferior because I felt I couldn’t control my body. I embraced modern dance with my whole heart, but keenly felt the loss of my ballet training as a deficit that directly impacted my ability to really be a modern dancer. The languages were different, but were related, and the

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2 I think it is important to note that for much of my life I did not consider this training. I felt that training and technique were words strictly associated with ballet and dance of other sorts did not deserve those associations. I now recognize my body as highly trained in modern dance techniques. I also recognize myself as occupationally trained as a student; much of this is a result of the embodied part of this process over the past year and my expanding definition of training.
body I inhabited still had its problems, even in modern dance. I was still struggling with disordered eating; spending hours in classes staring at myself in the mirror only seemed to heighten my self-consciousness. Eventually, during my last few years of high school, I decided I couldn’t pursue modern because my background in ballet wasn’t strong enough to sustain my technique. Essentially, I believed that I was too deformed to dance. Though I was naturally flexible, I believed that I wasn’t strong enough. I didn’t have the muscles I needed or the rigor of other girls my age. I was behind, and it didn’t really seem like there was any way to catch up. Rendering myself deformed, I left dance behind.

Upon arriving at Wesleyan, I had little to no interest in the Dance major and only decided to take Modern I during my freshman year after Susan Lourie was assigned as my academic advisor. I thought it might be good to have exercise built into my schedule as a college freshman and figured after close to thirteen years of dancing, I would be able to keep up in Modern I, despite my body insecurity. This class served as my re-entry into dance. I felt in my body in a way I had never felt before. The Dance department allowed me to find a connection between academia and dance; to locate academia within dance. Suddenly, my academic interests (in my dance classes and beyond) revolved around the body. This has had a huge impact on my four years at Wesleyan as I found myself through the Dance major and only later the American Studies major; these are the foundations, the techniques, the training I needed to bring this thesis to life.
LeeSaar and Gaga Inspiration

Gaga technique and LeeSaar the company both influenced my first semester choreography. Ohad Naharin is credited with inventing Gaga technique. He says,

Gaga is a new way of gaining knowledge and self-awareness through your body. Gaga provides a framework for discovering and strengthening your body and adding flexibility, stamina, and agility while lightening the senses and imagination. Gaga raises awareness of physical weakness, awakens numb areas, exposes physical fixations, and offers ways for their eliminations. The work improves instinctive movement and connects conscious and unconscious...³

According to Naharin, Gaga makes us,

become more aware of our form. We connect to the sense of the endlessness of possibilities. We explore multi-dimensional movement; we enjoy the burning sensation in our muscles, we are ready to snap, we are aware of our explosive power and sometimes we use it. We change our movement habits by finding new ones. We go beyond our familiar limits. We can be calm and alert at once.⁴

I spent the summer before creating this work interning with LeeSaar, an Israeli dance company in New York City that uses Gaga as their method of movement. Part of the reason I was drawn to LeeSaar as inspiration was because they performed modern dance, which is my comfortable medium, but many of the women were trained formally in ballet, and the quality of the movement called particular attention to the women’s bodies. The costumes LeeSaar uses ultimately impacted my costumes because they are minimal and draw attention to the body. Though my piece was not gaga, I did adopt many exercises and aesthetics from watching LeeSaar’s rehearsals and performances.

⁴ Ibid.
Princess Crocodile, a piece that the company performed at Wesleyan in the fall, “draws on themes of adolescence and womanhood, exploring the path to self-discovery.” In this piece, I was struck by the strength of and by the quirkiness of the dancers’ movement. The women were actually remarkably alike body-wise—they were all thin, toned, and mainly ballet trained—but there was an eroticism of charged female sexuality and power through the piece; I was interested in exploring this in my own work as I have already noted the ways in which the erotic female is a monstrous creature. Reviews of the piece said the dancers “move with great force and sharpness, but they also unspool physical complexities with a smooth, seductive muscularity,” a style I wanted to incorporate into my choreography.

Though I am not trained in Gaga, I felt that its goals surrounding physical weakness and strength, conscious and unconscious, paralleled my own interests in looking at form and deformity together. Gaga technique further resembles my methodology in my thesis as it draws seemingly opposite qualities together in order to enhance a dancer’s awareness of hybridity in their bodies. For the purpose of this chapter, however, I call attention to Gaga as a central inspiration for the first choreographic endeavor of this thesis.

reconfigured // form (2014) (first semester choreography)\(^8\)

“That inescapable animal walks with me,
He’s followed me since the black womb held,
Moves where I move, distorting my gesture,
   A caricature, a swollen shadow,
   A stupid clown of the spirit’s motive,
Perplexes and affronts with his own darkness,
   The Secret life of belly and bone,
Opaque, too near, my private, yet unknown,
   Stretched to embrace the very dear
With whom I would walk without him near…”\(^9\)
   – Delmore Schwartz, \textit{The Heavy Bear}

\textit{The Process}

I begin with a discussion of my process in the studio because it was particularly relevant to the research I was doing outside the studio. This choreography began in the earliest phase of my thesis, and I was still locating the nuances of my project. My first semester process both reflects this and refines the evolution of the conceptual basis of my writing in Part I.

During my first choreographic iteration of this thesis, I asked six women (two black women and four white women) to dance in my piece. When I selected these women, I was very conscious of their bodies. I wanted an array of different bodies, but I also wanted to work with experienced dancers because I was interested in thinking about techniques and trainings of dance that differed but their bodies, which all had common rooting in ballet. None of the women I asked to be in this piece would define themselves today as highly balletic, though many of their dance careers

\footnote{A video of my choreography can be found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AhDBSiOTvcE}

\footnote{Bordo, 1.}
began in ballet. At this point in my research, however, I wasn’t as concerned with ballet training and was more interested in using my rehearsal spaces to ask questions about form, deformity, freakishness, and spectacle.

During this piece, I thought a lot about training and self-care as they pertain to dancers. I know as a dancer, myself, I am always facing injuries or complications that have to do with my technique, training, lack thereof, and also my ability to care for and listen to my body.

The six women in this piece were Rebecca Hutman, Nora Thompson, Claire Marshall, Lakisha Gonsalves, Talia DeRogatis, and Jillian Roberts. I knew all of them had danced before and I found them inspirational, creative, and curious. I was very aware of the racial and bodily differences of my dancers; I was also aware of certain similarities. During our first rehearsal, we talked about my project. Though it was not fully fleshed out, I knew undesirable bodies, unattainable bodies, deformity, and form were important ideas that I wanted to explore further through an embodied technique and modern dance. Some of the key words that I asked my dancers to think about during our first rehearsal were: bare, freakish, creature, undesirable, unattainable, spectacle, virtuosity, and raw. These were the starting points for this work.

I asked my dancers to write about the part of their body they felt was most de*formed and the part of their body that was most formed. After they had written, I had them create a movement phrased based on their de*formed body part. I called these phrases the deformity phrases, and they were ultimately the foundation of the

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10. Three of the women I worked with have training more rooted in ballet, two in modern, and one in hip-hop.
11. I began this process using de*formed and later transitioned to de/formed as ways of conceptualizing the coexistence of form and deformity on the page.
piece; these phrases also changed my research questions as I no longer understood the ballet and freak show as similar because of disability, but rather because of deformity. Nora’s deformity, in particular, had to do with her shoulders being incorrectly structured for ballet; this made me think about the ways our trained deformities prevent us from adopting other techniques. For the ballerina, it is freakery they have trouble adopting, and for the freak, it is normalcy (or at least through the eyes of the audience). When we all shared our writing, I was surprised by some of the body parts they chose. I realized that their deformities were not apparent at all to me, or, at least, not in the way they saw them. At that moment, I realized this piece was important because it was going to push my own conceptions of form and deformity and add other dancers’ voices and bodies to my thesis, while still grounding it in my own body.

We talked a lot about ballet as a technique that simultaneously formed and deformed our bodies (this conversation evolved into my coinage of “deformed form” in Chapter Three). One of my dancers, Nora, says about the piece “I didn’t feel like we explored ballet explicitly – but it was implicit in our bodies. We all had technical ballet training and ballet ideals were stuck in the way we bent our knees or shaped our fingers. So ballet was there but it was in the background. It was a backdrop for us to explore our own bodies and identify our quirks/deformities/uniqueness.”

The Delmore Schwartz quotation at the beginning of this section is taken from a poem with which Susan Bordo opens her book, *Unbearable Weight: Feminist, Western Culture, and the Body* and analyzes in her first chapter. The lines that I have

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12 Nora Thompson, email message to author, March 16, 2015.
quoted above were lines that stood out to me particularly, given the focus of my piece. At one rehearsal, I gave each dancer a line of the poem and asked her to create an equivalence phrase (one movement for every word in the line). This process for creating movement was taken from Liz Lerman and Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, who used equivalence phrases in their class, “Blood, Muscle, Bone” at Wesleyan University.¹³

During the process we also created *Self Care Solos*; the solos were inspired by the Foucault’s techniques of self-care.¹⁴ I was interested in using self-care as another kind of training that I could impose on top of ballet training with these six dancers. I wanted to think about the ways we all take care of our dancing bodies to explore the self care that freak show performers would need to employ in order to condition their bodies. Though I did not end up using Foucault’s concept self care conceptually in the thesis, I do think it connects to my argument, especially in Chapter Three, about the kinds of training and physical work that we all, dancers, freaks, and everyone else perform on a regular basis.¹⁵

Receiving feedback after my showings, I realized that much of my piece, though created with ideas about freakishness and deformity, was not reading to the audience as freakish. My dancers were all beautiful performers and they executed movements seamlessly. In my final few weeks of choreography, I worked to push my dancers and the piece even further. I knew that the subtle deformities that my dancers’ identified as disabling to their dance practice would not be apparent to the

¹⁵ This relates back to my notion at the end of Chapter Three that we are all trained in a variety of different embodiments, which we enact on a regular basis.
audience, but I wanted the audience to know that I was interested in form and different forms. I needed the piece to be harder for my dancers; this would create the “freakishness” I was trying to achieve. What happens when even highly technical dancers are pushed beyond their comfort zones? For dancers, this is freaky and uncomfortable. I wanted the piece to be a little more uncomfortable. I asked my dancers to take bigger risks, take bigger steps, throw themselves off balance, and, most importantly, maintain direct eye contact with the audience. There was something particularly appealing and unsettling about Nora’s gaze. She watched the audience watching her in a way none of the other dancers did originally. The faculty and my fellow dance majors were interested in this as a form of oddity or spectacle because so often the audience’s gaze is the prioritized gaze. We watch moving bodies perform, but we are not often watched as we sit anonymously in the dark.¹⁶ My dancers and I talked about how to make the audience aware of the fact that they, too, were being watched. We talked about including mirrors, but it didn’t seem right and, in a way, felt too obvious. In the end, I realized that my dancers’ gaze was the part of the piece that was unsettling because it was unexpected, or perhaps queer or monstrous. Further, I was interested in the ways in which freak show performers are made to seem vulnerable on stage; for example, the Fat Lady is dressed in minimal clothing. While for her, this may not make her vulnerable, the audience reads it as exposure. I mimicked this idea in my own costumes and my coaching of my dancers’ gazes as I wanted them to be a part of a performance that encouraged vulnerability.

¹⁶ I discuss this anonymity, darkness, and removal from stages in Chapter One.
not perfection; these were not sylphs nor were they supposed to be specimen, but they were spectacles.

In her chapter, *Reading Choreography*, Susan Foster talks about the “gaze or the focus of the dancers”¹⁷ as another framing technique in choreography. Foster uses Deborah Hay’s dancers as an example suggesting that by looking at the audience the dancers “emphasize the similarities between viewers and dancers, saying, in effect, ‘we are simply people like yourselves, dancing, aware that this is a dance concert, but one that does not transform us into extraordinary beings.’”¹⁸ I am interested in this notion because I felt that my dancers’ gazes did the opposite of this; it said, we are aware that we are dancing and you are watching us and we are extraordinary and spectacles, but we know that you see us. I used this direct focus in order to situate the audience as voyeurs of the piece. The ending of my piece was intended even more so to leave the audience unsettled by staging a perceived intrusion on a moment of female sexuality. Because we are afraid to acknowledge female sexuality both in life and onstage, this moment employs connotations of monstrosity; we see something we feel we were not supposed to see. In this moment, I reference and critique narratives of sexology, which too easily intruded on female bodies putting them on display and onstage.

This process was central to the evolution of my research. My bodily explorations in the dance changed the focus of my thesis from dis/ability to de/formity. The time I spent with my dancers talking about training and form then became a main method for reading the images I selected in Chapter Two.

¹⁷ Foster, “Reading Choreography,” 63.
¹⁸ Ibid.
**The Performance / Final Piece**

The piece begins in a blackout with Yann Tiersen’s *Sur le Fil* from *Amelie*.[19] The lights come up, in a purple hue, to reveal one dancer on stage bent over with her arms extended. On the right side of the stage, another dancer’s bare legs are extended from behind the black curtain. The dancer on stage moves across the stage performing a slow modern movement variation with her gaze focused intensely on the audience. She knocks herself off balance and comes downstage as Michael Riesman and the Philip Glass Ensemble’s *Einstein on the Beach: Knee Play 1* begins to play. The sound score is largely composed of a chorus of voices counting from one to eight in different variations of the numbers, sometimes starting at two and going to eight, others only counting to four, but always chronologically. I was interested in the repetition of the number and the tonal simplicity juxtaposed with numbers of bodies on stage and repetition of movement. The sound score counted for my dancers and for the audience, training us (including the audience) to count our movements and to think about the piece as a form of training, the way we might think about a dance class, counting, and repetition enacting memories in our bodies.

At this point, a second dancer, Nora, enters from down stage left, staring at the audience while balancing on one foot and falling to the other foot. Her body is remarkably similar to Rebecca’s and they are dressed in the same costume: a black leotard with a black long sleeve shirt and black socks, revealing their entire legs. The two come into unison and move through the phrase with which Rebecca began the piece. As they reach for their upstage leg and knock themselves off balance, they

[19] I liked this music because I thought it resembled the music a music box makes; in the second iteration of my work, I used an actual music box to open my piece.
come to face each other, instead of the audience, for the first time. A third dancer, Claire, appears. The three jump in unison with one arm swinging from one foot to the other. Claire is dressed differently from Nora and Rebecca. She wears a black shirt that ends above her belly button (revealing her midriff), black underwear, and black socks. I asked the dancers to tie their hair back in tight balletic buns. Nora and Rebecca collapse to the ground and Claire collapses too, but only for a moment, before recovering with her upstage leg extended, her body facing stage left, but her head focused on the audience. She moves downstage and meets Rebecca and Nora in a shoulder stand where the three extend one leg, exposing their bodies to the audience in an uncomfortable manner as the audience is forced to confront their groins upside-down, a perspective often avoided in performance. One of the major choreographic elements that I navigated throughout the piece was learning how to make things fully frontal and not shift the positioning due to my perceived notions of how movement is best seen; I wanted to challenge that norm by making the dancers and the audience respectively expose and view their bodies from new, different angles. The dancers slowly move their legs up and around until one leg is above their the other leg, and then they kick one leg up above them and execute a series of movements, all in a shoulder stand, until they pause with their left legs curled underneath them, their right legs up in the air and bent, their right arms holding their right legs and their left hands reaching in between their legs in a contorted position.20

When the dancers’ eyes were not on the audience, the audience’s eyes were on the dancers’ bodies. Though this may seem obvious; I wanted to confront gaze head

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20 This is a hard moment to visualize; it can be seen in the recording of my piece. Essentially the women are upside-down, awkward, and exposed during this moment. The audience, too, may feel uncomfortable with their access to viewing the dancers’ bodies.
on. Are we comfortable staring when objects become people and stare back at us? I wanted to use a gaze that I felt was similar to a freak show aesthetic, where the performers look back and confront the audience in close proximity to create a certain level of discomfort and challenge the normativity of the audience in that process.

Costuming this piece brought up a lot of conversations about vulnerability. I wanted my dancers to be as minimally clothed as possible, as I wanted to draw attention to their form, and, in order to do so, I wanted to see flesh. Flesh is such an essential part of the Fat Lady and the ballerina’s performances, as we saw in Chapter Two and Three, and I wanted to reference this. Many of my dancers, however, were uncomfortable with exposing their bodies. I, too, understood this discomfort, as I have worn costumes I felt were not flattering. I did not want my dancers to be uncomfortable or self-conscious, but I did want them to be vulnerable; this was a fine line. In the end, they all wore different versions of the costume; some revealed legs, other revealed stomachs, others revealed arms. It was an interesting lesson for me, though. I wanted to echo the two performances (the ballet and the freak show) and the grotesque, the discomfort they may sometimes cause, while I also respected my dancers and their needs.

At this point, my remaining three dancers enter the space. Jillian is downstage right and wears a black sports bra, black biker shorts, and socks. Talia, mid-stage left, matches her. Lakisha, all the way upstage left, wears just a leotard. Talia and Lakisha each perform a deformity solo touching their thighs, stomachs, and buttocks, while Jillian does a phrase inspired by *The Heavy Bear*. Slowly, everyone comes to move together, flailing around the stage, and the lights change into white light and mostly
sidelight, placing more emphasis on their bodies. The women fling themselves off balance as they clasp their hands in front of their bodies. This portion of the piece had no set amount of time, as I wanted them to push themselves to a point where they were losing balance and tired. Unison was important to me because I wanted to see the way the different bodies moved all at once; in these moments, I felt that I could most identify form and deformity together because I saw them coexisting across the bodies of my dancers. Each body interpreted the movement in a different way, and I didn’t coach the dancers to change that; I wanted them to be different because they are different. This felt very anti-ballet and traditional unison to me, and though it is not “freakish” at all, it is noticeably different than the disciplined and identical bodies in the corps de ballet.

The piece continues exploring similar themes of training, stability, form, deformity, ability, and disability. The dancers move through space as ballet-trained, modern dancers, conscious of their insecurities and aware of the audience’s gaze. This piece served as an abstract research template; it allowed me to ask questions, realize my contradictions, and move my theoretical work forward outside the studio.

Dancers’ Voices and Reflections

I want to share some of my dancers’ reflections about the piece below because the piece was about them; it was about their individuality, their unity, their training, their bodies, their self-consciousness, their recognition of themselves as formed, deformed, disabled, abled, and hyper-abled all at once. Their voices and their bodies are the heart of the piece and are imperative to any written explanation of the work:
Last semester I was struck by our community, by how much we felt supported by one and other and how much we were in this difficult conversation together. We were in dialogue with bodies – of course, there was talking, but a lot of the work and the communication and the making of friends was done by dancing for and with. I felt no shame in your rehearsals. I felt excited about showing my body more than I’m used to. I felt proud of my body even when I was jealous of other bodies.

We talked about deformity a lot, but I wonder now how ironic it was, given how nicely formed humans we all are/were. Of course, we all had our oddities and dissimilarities – but we are not “disabled” in a legal sense; none of us draw eyes the way the freak show does. How do our dancing (nice looking) bodies actually show little or no deformity at all? Or how is our deformity masked by technical definitions or binaries or formed and deformed? --Nora

What was amazing was how free the whole piece felt. Usually before I perform I have to give myself some sort of pep talk: “This is what you should think. This is what you need to feel.” But this piece did a really good job of conveying “us.” So whatever I felt that day just naturally fit right into the piece… I think that speaks to the fact that the piece was a reflection of all our experiences (and sometimes dissatisfactions) with dance as it had been taught to us and dance as we’d experienced it… That’s what made this dance unique—it wasn’t just a depiction of something, it was our way through. It wasn’t just like “here’s Miranda’s thesis;” now, show the audience. It was a very live paradigm: contortion and distortion in a way we’d all felt, and each time I danced, I felt like I was actively navigating between the ideals of dance I’d tried to embody for so long, the physical limitations of my body, and movement that just feels good.

We’re all super different dancers so that journey looks different on all of us, but I think we all found the choreographic and performance process similarly introspective and cathartic. –Rebecca

Dance in the Western canon is so focused on form. In order to embody the forms that have been codified in different dance traditions, dancers are often asked to conceal and alter and suppress the natural shape of a body. We began this piece with prompts that asked us to lean into our insecurities (products of superimposed pressures to fit preexisting forms) rather than conceal them. The movement highlighted the most uncomfortable aspects of our personal embodied experiences. When we looked in the mirror or assessed our own movement, we didn’t ask, "What looks beautiful?" or "How can I make the cleanest line?" The movement was driven by physical frustrations, limitation and

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21 Nora Thompson, email message to author, March 16, 2015.
22 Rebecca Hutman, email message to author, March 11, 2015.
"deformity"* Despite these intentions, we weren't fully able to depart from our technical backgrounds and the forms that we are so practiced in replicating. As a group of peer girls, we were admittedly still pre-occupied with our form. Our comparative tendency was particularly noticeable when we took pictures that might have become a projection for the dance piece. We were trying to pose in a way that highlighted our individual deformity. What was revealed in the process was closer to normative ideas of form than deformity. Our conversation throughout our photo shoot focused on compliments and self-deprecating statements about our own shapes. While we tried to capture what was unique about each of our forms, we noticed afterwards that it was difficult to tell our images apart. In short, I think this exercise succeeded in reinforcing the very homogeneity and conformity of dancers bodies that we intended to problematize.

*In this case, deformity never felt like a negative thing, but a concept that challenged the historic "forms" (often products of a patriarchal aesthetic) that much of dance builds upon and reproduces. – Claire

Marie Chouinard Performance and Inspiration

As I started my second semester choreography, I had the privilege of seeing Compagnie Marie Chouinard perform a piece titled Gymnopédies at Wesleyan for the New England Premiere. The piece is about forty minutes long and uses Érik Satie’s Gymnopédies No. 1, No. 2, No. 3 as the music for the piece. The music is live on stage, played by the dancers as they rotate in and out of the piano bench. The beginning of the piece is striking as we watch fabric fall from the dancers’ bodies, revealing their naked bodies and see them walk slowly upstage, disappearing into another fold in the curtain. This immediately caught my attention because it focused the entire audience on the physical bodies of the dancers before any action evolved in the piece. I had thought a lot about nudity in my first semester piece, seeking a way to use nudity to show form, deformity, and the convergence of the two on bodies, but I

25 I was inspired by this piece to use Érik Satie in the second iteration of my choreography (form[all] training).
felt that this moment explored these ideas in a really interesting, bold, and powerful way.

As the piece progresses, sexuality and an exploration of the duet form unfold. The dancers move across the stage in a clump, removing their all black clothing to reveal more and more skin. There are highly charged erotic moments, mainly heteronormative ones; the two homoerotic moments felt parodic. The sexuality in the piece feels monstrous as it amalgamates many forms; additionally, it feels like an intrusion (which I attempted to create in my first piece) because we, the audience, are invited to watch it, which is unusual in our cultural imaginary that confines sexuality (in particularly female sexuality) to privacy. The dancers “conclude” the piece and come back wearing red clown noses, at which the piece continues to devolve. The dancers try to speak with the noses on but are rendered mute. The piece appears to end, dancers bow, but then it continues. In the talkback, two dancers characterized the piece as having a “clownish desperation.”

The element of the piece that struck me the most was the commentary on female freakishness. There is, what I would call, a contemporary pas de deux, in which the woman is incredibly tall (probably over six feet) and the man is quite average. She towers over him, changing the entire dynamic of the duet. The woman wears a short black backless dress, black kneepads, black pointe shoes, and a black hat that covers her hair and eyes. Her movements are balletic, but are deformed. What I mean when I say this is that she references the ballet lexicon that I explore in my third chapter about technique, but she also distorts the well-established movements.

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26 Marie Chouinard talkback at Wesleyan University, February 7.
Her knees remain mostly bent, causing a break in the lines that are so important in most ballets. I wanted to incorporate this idea of a broken *pas de deux* into my own work. This moment was an embodied realization of monstrous “deformed form,” which allowed me to further connect freakishness, female sexuality, and training.

Marie Chouinard’s *bODY_rEMIX/gOLDBERG_vARIATIONS* (2005) was also an inspiration for my work. In this piece, Marie Chouinard’s dancers are dressed in different costumes, which appear to be inspired by but quite different from traditional ballet dress (leotard and tights). Their bodies are exposed and essential to the piece. Some dancers wear pointe shoes, some dancers wear one pointe shoe, some wear pointe shoes on their hands. The pointe shoes on the dancers’ hands were particularly phallic, reminding me of Susan Foster’s work. They use many props, including crutches, canes, protheses, ballet barres, harnesses, and more. I read these props as an intersection of disability and ability. The dancers were hyper-abled and did not need the crutches, but used the crutches to enhance their movement and to comment on dance as typically reserved for able-bodied people. All of the props, and particularly pointe shoes, make clear this dichotomy that we frequently wrestle with in dance: how does dance training disable us while also enhancing our ability? How do these accessories limit some movement, while also expanding possibilities for other movements?²⁹

²⁷ My duet inspired by this *pas de deux* can be found at 4:45 in the YouTube link of my video. *form[all] training* (2015)


²⁹ Both of these pieces deserve much longer analyses but for the purpose of this chapter I reflect only on the moments that were most influential in my own process.
Marie Chouinard says of this piece “ten dancers execute variations on the exercise of freedom…we also see them using different devices…which at times liberate their movements, at others fetter it, and at still others create it.” Pointe shoes do the same. I decided to use pointe shoes in my second piece to challenge myself to think of the ways pointe shoes create movement possibilities and restrict others. This piece was largely inspirational in the choreography of my second work.


“[A]utobiographical practice is one of those cultural occasions when the history of the body intersects the deployment of subjectivity.” – Sidonie Smith

**The Process**

This piece was choreographed as a trio, though there are many elements of it that are more similar to a solo. The piece details Caroline Shadle’s story about training to become a professional ballerina, but ultimately making the decision to not pursue ballet. In this way, this piece can be read as [auto]biographical. The sound score is Caroline’s voice as she navigates the complexities of ballet; the piece tells her story, using “the history of [her] body.” I decided, however, not to make a solo because though Caroline’s story is personal, versions of it are universal, and I felt that it was important that this piece speak to a wider audience, regardless of its

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31 A video of my choreography can be at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-1c_qkS8jOw
33 I bracket [auto] because though I was technically the choreographer, Caroline did choreograph much of the piece and I feel that it was autobiographical for her and biographical for me. Both terms are relevant to the piece. I am drawing on Ann Cooper Albright’s theory that “autobiography, like dance, is situated at the intersection of bodily experience and cultural representation. Meaning literally “to write one’s life,” autobiography draws its inspiration from one’s being-in-the-world—that complex and often contradictory interaction of individual perspective and cultural meaning…” (Cooper Albright, “Dancing Bodies and the Stories They Tell,” in *Choreographing Difference*. (Hanover, New Hampshire: Wesleyan University Press, 1997), 119).
34 Ibid, 120.
I asked Rebecca Hutman and Sophie Miller to dance in the piece as well; all three women are technical dancers and are trained in ballet.

This piece is my ode to ballet training. An essential component of this thesis was learning about ballet, not just the lexicon, but really learning about what ballerinas have at stake in this art. As I am not a ballerina, I was conscious of my removal from the ballet world. I wanted to immerse myself in ballet and I did so by taking ballet, but also by centering my piece on training and technique and Rebecca, Caroline, and Sophie’s personal histories with ballet. In a way this piece is a convergence among my lack of ballet training, my dancers’ ballet training as youth, and what happens when they decided to let go of becoming ballerinas.

During my rehearsal process, we adopted many ways of moving from both ballet classes and modern dance classes. We did authentic movement, an exercise where one dances alone with her eyes closed for five minutes, but we also created a waltz and a petite allegro (both structures adopted from ballet). Often, we tried to figure out how we could merge modern dance and ballet; hybridity was central to my choreographic process as well as to my reading of freak and ballerina bodies.

Near the beginning of my rehearsal process, I asked all of my dancers to bring a pair of pointe shoes to rehearsal. I was not sure yet how I wanted to use them in the piece, though I knew I wanted to incorporate them as they are an iconic element of ballet. Caroline brought a pair of pointe shoes, which she called “deshanked” pointe shoes. I was fascinated by this idea: what is a pointe shoe when you remove the

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35 Bill T. Jones is known for his work creating autobiographical dance (Ibid., 120).
36 Recall here monstrosity as a visual representation of amalgamation; it was this form of monstrosity that I intended to embody in my work. It is imperative that we use this definition and not a sexological definition to understand the ways in which my dancers’ bodies are monstrous. (Their bodies are monstrous because of androgyne and balletic form).
shank? Is it just a ballet slipper? How does one deshank a pointe shoe? I decided that we would deshank a pair of pointe shoes for Rebecca and Sophie. Deshanking a pointe shoe is no easy task. Rebecca’s pointe shoes were Russians, which means they are even harder than the average pointe shoe and made with a wooden shank. The girls ripped at the shoes, banging them against the floor, stepping on the shoes, jumping on the shoes, and ultimately hammering the shoes. The two had very different reactions; for Rebecca, the process was cathartic. She enjoyed doing it, and it felt satisfying to destroy her pointe shoes, which had become metaphors of constriction, revealing her fraught relationship with technique. Sophie, however, could barely do it. She jumped softly, and I ended up finishing deshanking the pointe shoes for her.

This idea of catharsis became central to my piece, but before each one of my dancers felt comfortable enough to let go in rehearsal, I needed to create a space where we trusted one another. I bought each dancer a journal at the beginning of my rehearsal process. These journals became important to our choreographic method. Often, I would ask my dancers to write down words they associated with technique and training and then create movement phrases based on those words. I also asked them to write about their own form and deformity.

I asked each of my dancers to come up with a word she felt summarized the piece and the process for her. The three words were: resolution, apotheosis, and catharsis. Later, in their reflections, it will become clear why these words were central to this process.
The Performance / Final Piece

This piece is Caroline’s story. She allows us into her world of discipline, rigor, and training. The sound track for the piece is Caroline’s voice mixed with a variety of different music; she tells her story. The lights come up and Sophie enters a square box of light and opens a music box, suspended from the ceiling. The music box begins to play and we see a little ballerina twirling in circles. I was interested in using the music box because of its resonance as a fantasy world for girl children. Many young girls receive such music boxes, regardless of whether or not they are dancers; it initiates the ballerina as a feminine ideal.

My decision to include Caroline’s voice is significant to the piece. So often we do not hear the voices of ballerinas. They are silenced by their bodies, by their employment as performers. Something similar may be said about the voices of freak performers. I wanted, then, to juxtapose traditional ballet with Caroline’s voice and story. It made the effortlessness of her movement more powerful as we could hear her talking about the pain she endured arriving at that point.

As the piece continues, Caroline sits upstage right, adjusting her pointe shoes, getting ready to perform. Sophie interprets for her; she marks Caroline’s feet with her arms. This is something many of us do in ballet class at the barre – a vocabulary ballerinas have developed and know. Rebecca also marks Caroline’s feet, but she does so with her own flexed, ex-ballet, modern dance feet. As the piece progresses, 

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Though this piece was only about the ballet and not the freak show, I used my method of juxtaposition to create continuity between this piece and my research.
we see Caroline perform a phrase from *The Nutcracker*. After, she is thrown into a duet with Sophie. The duet resembles a *pas de deux* but occurs between two women. The women end this moment by tapping their pointe shoes against the marley floor. The noise it makes is loud and ugly – far different from the illusion of the ballerina standing on a single point. After this moment, the three dance together, moving at different speeds with their own interpretations of a phrase I created. Caroline leaves and Sophie and Rebecca are left alone for a moment. They perform a duet, also inspired by the *pas de deux*, but this one is competitive and the two pull at each other’s feet, purposely trying to knock one another over. Caroline reenters the stage moving slowly; the other two are still. She wears her pointe shoes and moves toward the two women. Upon her arrival she begins an incredibly slow grand plié. Rebecca takes off one pointe shoe as Caroline approaches the ground and Sophie’s arm serves as a *barre* for Caroline’s stabilization. This moment, though focused on Caroline, incorporates Rebecca and Sophie’s stories as well; Rebecca is the anti-ballerina and Sophie is caught in between a world of ballet and modern dance – she supports Caroline, but is on the floor with Rebecca.

I decided to costume my dancers only in leotards and pointe shoes for this piece. Though this may seem obvious, as it is a typical ballet uniform, I originally was interested in using skirts and covering much more skin. My dancers practiced in rehearsal skirts for many rehearsals. My piece changed entirely when I had them take the skirts off. Performing in leotards, they were much more vulnerable. This choice also referenced a story of body insecurity to which I, too, belong. I faced similar, but

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38 I chose to use choreography from *The Nutcracker*, as it has become a mainstream performance that many individuals are familiar with. Though my audience may not have recognized the exact choreography, I wanted to allude to its prevalence as an American form of entertainment today.
fewer, challenges costuming this piece because though these three women felt uncomfortable at moments, they had trained in a tradition that had asked them to feel discomfort for much of their lives; they were used to wearing only leotards and pointe shoes; exposure was a part of technique. The challenge with this group was allowing exposure to induce vulnerability, rather than calling on a highly performative, sylph-like technique. In only leotards, the piece did not seem as easy; the risks they took in balance were visible to the audience. I saw their legs shaking each night. I encouraged them to take these risks throughout the process; falling was important, as it is part of ballet but not seen on stage. Though I adopted many ideas of ballet, this piece was not a ballet; it was modern dance, and I had the authority to break rules.

I chose to end this piece with Michael Riesman and Philip Glass Ensemble’s *Einstein on the Beach: Knee Play 1*. I reference the counting voices in my discussion of my first piece; these voices allowed me to echo the intention and tone of my first piece (*reconfigured//form*), though my second piece (*form[all] training*) took on a much more specific approach. As the counting faded in, Caroline spoke about ending her journey as a professional ballerina. She spoke of the new opportunities attending college provided her with, but also of regrets and moments of wishing she had pursued ballet professionally. The piece ends in silence with Caroline running in big circles around the stage. She ran for a different length of time every night; it seemed the time she ran increased every night. She gestured her arms in traditional ballet *port de bras*, but her speed distorted their shape. While she is running, we see her frustration with form; we see her acknowledgement of embodying a deformed form in more ways than one. In her eyes, she is deformed as she is not a ballerina; in my eyes,
though, she is formed as her movements are precise and her body a relic of her training. The piece ends with Caroline down stage center, very close to the audience. Sophie closes the music box. Caroline gestures her right arm towards the audience and then her left. The other two women take her hands and the lights fade on all three.

This choreographic endeavor was quite different than my first one. It was specific in a way that I didn’t realize was possible when I was creating my first semester piece. This piece’s process immersed me in ballet, so that I could then refine my conceptual analysis to be more specific and true to the world and culture of ballet. Though I was familiar with Caroline’s story and wrote about it in my third chapter, the piece was very hard for me to watch; it tells a story of fighting with our bodies, resisting deformity, but falling out of form. Ann Cooper Albright says of [auto]biographical dance, “this face-to-face interaction is an infinitely more intense and uncomfortable experience which demands that the audience engage with their own cultural autobiographies.” For me, this piece did exactly that; it forced me to recall my own struggles with disordered eating and body image as I watched three women, exposed and vulnerable, sharing their stories on the stage in front of me. This element of the piece is where monstrosity plays a role because, by confronting the audience with my dancers’ bodies and stories, we were able to see the visual amalgamation of training and gender that are displayed on their bodies. These bodies do not look monstrous using historical definitions; we only locate monstrosity through their portrayal of mixture. This piece was an essential part of this research process as it truly allowed me to be physically embodied in my theoretical work.

39 Cooper Albright, “Dancing Bodies and the Stories They Tell,” 121.
Dancers’ Voices and Reflections:

Again, here, I have included my dancers’ voices as I think they are central to the piece and aid me as I think critically about this process.

Creating, thinking about, and dancing in this piece has been an overwhelmingly meaningful and cathartic experience. This piece and the process of inventing and honing it has been one of the only spaces for me to wholly and completely begin to process and come to terms with my lifelong devotion to and experience with dance--ballet, specifically. I am grateful for being able to explore the marvelous, refined qualities of ballet, as well as the harmful, destructive facets of it. Being able to perform classical ballet, distorted ballet, contemporary movement, pointe sections, and flat sections all in one piece has allowed me to investigate my various experiences with dance. I have been able to take these disparate experiences with dance and combine them as a whole, as one cohesive story. Being able to embody and express this story through movement while simultaneously listening to the spoken story has made the piece even more full for me. This choice has allowed me to not only express my story in its most accurate and authentic form through movement--but also for me to claim ownership over this story and, ultimately, to share it. Being a ballerina is freakish. But it's divinely freakish. You have to give your whole self to being a ballerina, to this art form that distorts and sculpts and warps and shapes your body; there is something inherently magnificent, abnormal, and indescribable about that. – Caroline Shadle

This piece gave me a medium through which I had the opportunity to explore many of the thoughts that have run through my head over the past few years. One thing that has stuck with me every night after performing this piece in front of people, was how self-judgment played a role throughout my dance training. I became much more aware of this self judgment when we began performing in front of an audience as opposed to just for ourselves in the studio. I spent almost four hours a day staring at myself in the mirror throughout high school. I used to love my body. But freshman year, the girls in my dance class began calling me the Little Thick One. I wasn’t fat. I wasn’t overweight. I just had a little girl’s body, which included a cute little belly that stuck out in my leotard. Over the summer between freshman and sophomore year, I lost a lot of weight. The first day back in dance class, the teacher came over and patted my stomach and said, “Good job, keep it up.” My self-judgment was born. My body is now never perfect, I never feel the same love towards it as I used to. I accept it, but I don’t respect it. I don’t have a

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Caroline Shadle, email message to author, March 30, 2015.
full-length mirror in my dorm room in an attempt to create a better attitude towards my body. This piece gave the opportunity to explore these feelings and the impact they had on my mentality. I didn’t realize the full extent to which ballet class had affected me throughout my life. I don’t regret it. I love ballet, and dancing in general. I have just become more aware of the harmful aspects of dance. I am so grateful for the opportunity to dance in this piece. Working with these girls, and hearing the experience that they went through - especially Caroline - made me feel less alone. I feel I now have support, someone else who gets it. Someone else who understands me. I also feel like piece has provided us with an opportunity to enlighten others to the full extent of how dance affects people. It’s not just a hobby, it’s a life style. A life style that imprints on you forever. Your body keeps record of everything you’ve put it through, both physically and emotionally. Most of all, this piece just felt honest. It didn’t feel freakish; at least, it didn’t make me feel freakish. Many people look at ballerinas and see strange bodies, strange feet, strange habits. I don’t feel strange or weird after making this piece. I feel whole. I feel acceptance. Finally, I had the opportunity to present to others how I view myself as a dancer and my experience as a dancer. Hopefully it allows them to gain insight into our lives. Mostly, it allowed me to heal. I dealt with emotions I didn’t even realize I was feeling. Now I feel like they’ve been resolved. – Sophie Miller

Being in the piece has been immensely cathartic and really growth-producing. It’s helped me define my complicated feelings and put them into words and into movement. It’s helped me reclaim the very thing that dance once had a monopoly on for me: the means of realizing, defining, contextualizing, and communicating my emotions. It’s helped me realize what, for me, is enduring about dance and what is unnecessary, and therefore healthy to leave behind. Ultimately, and most importantly, it’s helped me feel like I didn’t just quit dance or invest in something that had no future for me. Dance served a vital role in my life: it taught me how to commit, how to be challenged, how to be wrong, how to overcome, how to learn from others, how to follow the rules, how to break them, how to love, and when and how to leave something you love more than anything else. It taught me things will be okay after you do. Dance taught me to do all these things through dance, and I'm learning how to do these things outside dance. And, I'm repurposing dance to be a source of fulfillment into my life without it becoming, once again, the only means by which I can accomplish the vital parts of life. – Rebecca Hutman

41 Sophie Miller, email message to author, April 3, 2015.
42 Rebecca Hutman, email message to author, April 4, 2015.
Conclusion:

Ultimately, it was important for me to use choreography to guide my research questions. As a dancer, this work is impacted by my experience of and in my body and the bodies around me. Creating work allowed me to share my thesis with many bodies and to gain perspective from their interactions with my work. It was essential to use dance, a visual medium, to explore my topic because ballet and the freak show are both visual representations of monstrosity and deformed form. Further, my discussion of the freak show and the ballet rely on their visual performances. Not to include a visual element in my research, then, would be ignoring a major element of the forms I worked so hard to bring together. My method needed to include embodiment in this way.

As I conclude this work, I emphasize the importance of embodiment. Training, a central concept of my thesis, is an embodied work. I suggested at the end of Chapter Three that we are all trained; I want to reiterate this point. All of us live our lives through our day-to-day embodied experiences. We must acknowledge the work we do on our bodies as technique because it is through this technique that we inhabit identity categories. Gender, race, and dis/ability are all identity categories, which must be learned. There is nothing inherent about our bodily form; instead our bodies are a medium for the training we endure, embrace, and reject. Mark Twain says, “[t]raining- training is everything; training is all there is to a person.”43 I leave

you now to your own training; to exploring your gender, monstrosity, deformed form, and embodiment using this lens.

I invite you to view my choreography here:

reconfigured//form (2014):
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AhDBSiOTvcE

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1i9hnfQXSbQ
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