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# A Queer and Crip Grotesque: Katherine Dunn's

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A Queer and Crip Grotesque: Katherine Dunn's *Geek Love*

By

Megan Wiedeman

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
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## **DEDICATION**

To my little mom and little fish.

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## ABSTRACT

The grotesque has long been utilized in literature as a means for subverting societal constraints and inverting constructions of normalcy. Unfortunately, in many instances, it has been constructed at the expense of disabled characters using their embodiment as metaphorical plot devices rather than social and political agents. Criticism of the grotesque's use of bodily difference has prompted this analytical project in order to rethink disability as socially and politically positioned within texts, rather than simply aesthetics for symbolic means. The aim of this paper is to explore the ways the literary grotesque can be reread using queer theory and crip theory as frameworks for constructing agential disabled embodiments in Katherine Dunn's *Geek Love*. Ultimately, the potential of queer and crip interventions necessitates an examination of the systems of power disabled subjects operate within in these narratives.

## INTRODUCTION

There are only a handful of popular postmodern novels that set the freak show as their backdrop. *Geek Love*, a national book award finalist, employs the literary grotesque as a framework for shaping the events that take place within its own carnivalesque freak show and, in doing so, participates in the tensions present within the genre. Criticized for its coopting of disabled bodies, the grotesque must be negotiated within the text to achieve subversive ends. Critical interventions from queer theory and crip theory can resituate the inversions that take place using bodily difference as political rather than metaphorical. As such, it becomes vital that narrative prosthesis, or the leaning on disability for narrative metaphor, be analyzed and critiqued.

It is the essential task of this paper to employ queer and crip frameworks to interpret and imagine grotesque representations of disability as potentially liberating. It is equally the responsibility of this analysis to examine the ways in which it is harmful. By asking whether the literary grotesque is truly subversive in *Geek Love*, I stand to interrogate the use of disabled and disfigured subjects by queering and crippling their representations.

## **METHODS: FEMINIST LITERARY CRITICISM**

Literary criticism is rooted in a tradition of argumentation by which claims can be verified using evidence to support them (Sosnoski 36). The aim of criticism is to discern truths and falsehoods within those claims, validating an argument against other critics and the primary text. It entails a contextualization of the text in its historical location, a deciphering of symbols and meaning making, as well as unpacking representations and social commentary (Kaelin, 290-292). Literary criticism generally adheres to the following structure: introduction, background, argument, refutation, and conclusion (Sosnoski, 36). This paper follows the model closely, though is organized using different language to meet the same goals.

What makes literary criticism identifiably feminist is its focus on gender and, more recently, its intersection with race, sexual orientation, class, nationality, political location, age and education (Warhol & Price Herndl, x). Feminist literary criticism expands the traditional literary formula by asking vital questions about the limits of literature and its criticisms.

This project is dedicated to a method of feminist literary criticism. This includes discussions of the social and political context of and within the narrative, as well as the ways in which the grotesque manifests and is applied. These arguments are made using examples from the text and supported using theory and other critics' findings. Finally, though not a means to an end, the conclusion states the findings in hopes to not only actualize the subversive grotesque in the novel, but to speak to the queer and crip possibilities of it as an inductive exercise. Feminist literary criticism is used as a method to speculate, generate, and reflect the retellings and reinterpretations of literature.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Geek Love

*Geek Love*, Katherine Dunn's most accomplished novel, follows the traveling Binewski Carnival Fabulon and the family after which it is named. Aloysius "Al" Binewski is the father and founder of the carnival's freak show: his son Arturo "Arty," the prophetic limbless Aqua Boy; Electra and Iphigenia "Elly and Iphy," conjoined twins and pianists extraordinaire; Olympia, "Oly," the self-disclosed hunchbacked albino dwarf and narrator of the novel; and Fortunato "Chick," the aesthetically "normal" telekinetic youngest sibling. All were born to Crystal Lil, their mother, who, alongside her husband, formulated ways to alter their children in womb through drugs, poisons, and chemicals to keep the family business alive.

The story takes two parallel trajectories: an inner frame that provides a detailed history of the Binewski family in their day-to-day lives, the outer frame is a complex narrative of ethical dilemmas set after the Fabulon has ended. Both stories are told from Oly's perspective, and we follow as she shapes the narrative through her disabled embodiment. Her narrative creates a site for analyzing not only the ways in which the grotesque is presented in the novel, but the possibility for queering the grotesque through her disablement.

*Geek Love* has received attention for the way it engages with socioeconomic class and its relationship with capitalism, as well as how disability interacts with the two (Duane 106; Sullivan 411). Critics have also been quick to discuss the religious overtones present the novel, both in Miranda's upbringing and in the Cult of Arturo (Hardin 345; Meyers 109; Worthington

119). Discussions about Dunn's use of the normal and abnormal binary are also numerous and act as a springboard for this discussion.

Critics like David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder have critiqued *Geek Love* for its employment of voyeurism as both exploitative and valuable to queer and disabled subjects. They point to examples where Dunn negotiates binaries that exist in capitalism, myths about normalcy, pathologization of disability, and the reinvention of the grotesque (Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis* 141-162). They develop a theory of "narrative prosthesis" that examines the use of disability in literature that argues that people with disabilities are marginalized amidst their representations rather than through erasure or absence. Narrative prosthesis addresses several concerns regarding disability as narrative device. First, it acknowledges the pervasiveness of disability as a descriptive characterization of literary characters. In addition, it examines the juxtaposition between mainstream discourses that lean on disability as plot device and those works that expose the artificiality of those narratives. In doing so, *Narrative Prosthesis* examines the material harm that can come from figurative representations and helps actualize the violences that these repeated narratives inflict. These material effects are acknowledged as cultural productions that shape the way disabled subjects operate in the world, which is distinctly tied to representations put forth by mainstream literary discourse (Mitchell and Snyder 9). Thus, literature has benefited from the symbolic power, metaphorical insights, and subversive capabilities of disability as metaphor without critically engaging with disabled subjects themselves. This means that disability, in these literary representations, is without social or political weight and is used as a plot device or narrative apparatus. In this paper we will reclaim both the political and social significance of the disabled subject and move towards a queer and crip understanding of the grotesque.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

### The Literary Grotesque

The grotesque comes from the word “grotto,” a place of underground secrecy, of burial, of earthly sanctuary and ancient mystery. *La grottesca*, its Italian origin, was coined during the excavation of ruins in Rome that revealed ornamental and arabesque designs contrasted with monstrous fusions of man and animal (Baker 2; Barasch 13; Corey 32; Kayser 20; Yates 7). With paradox at its core, the juxtaposition of highly intricate and horrific images is the basis for the literary and artistic form referred to in this paper as the grotesque.

#### *Positive and Negative Tension*

The push and pull of oxymoronic images within the grotesque is theorized as being positive and/or negative. Wolfgang Kayser emphasizes the elements of fear and terror, monstrosities and horror, the destructive and the sinister, to create the negative grotesque (Corey 33; Yates 19). In literature the negative grotesque presents itself through characters who are pariahs, paranormal, monsters, or have atypical bodies; it appears as decaying environment, ruined architecture, fusions of nature, and chaos.

Its counterpart, the positive grotesque, is discussed by Mikhail Bakhtin as being comical and humorous, rejuvenating and renewing, transformational and in the act of becoming (Corey 33; Danow 35; Dentith 226). In this way it is redemptive, offering new futures and potentials from seemingly grim circumstances. The positive grotesque is one of comedic excess and exaggeration, often using the body as a site of humor. Exaggerated limbs and facial features are

trademarks of the positive grotesque, notwithstanding sexual humor and other absurdities. It rejects the individual and embraces community, arguing that the limits of the individual are imaginary, that we are all connected and thus all one (Yates 21). It links all humans to one another in a way that each person “belongs to the immortal people who create history” (Dentith 253). Communities and their histories become part of the ontologies of generations that follow, flowing in and out of time and being.

### *The Grotesque Female Body*

The traditional grotesque body plays on the elements of the positive grotesque, focusing on the functions of the body and nods to the return to the physical, the grotto. The physical is not just the corpse, but also nature and the environment. The positive grotesque, as aforementioned, is interested in the act of becoming which the grotesque body always is. In aging, the body’s natural shape shifting, we see this transformation of becoming new. Yet, it is in the orifices of the body we find the fusion of the human and the world; the mouth, vagina, and anus are consumers and producers, accepting and expelling the natural world, sites of life and death. They are the caverns of the body, the grottos of the flesh. The grotesque body consumes, digests, defecates, vomits, urinates, sweats, and drools. It is open and connected to the world; the body is not its own (Dentith 226; McWilliam 218; Russo 63).

Female figures are inherently more grotesque in both form and function. Heightened scatological processes and corporal oscillation such as menstruation, gestation, lactation, and procreation mark the female body as one both in and of the world (Dentith 230; Russo 63). It swells and recedes, gives and receives; it is a body ever in flux, always becoming and coming undone.

### *Carnavalesque and Cosmic Terror*

The co-presence of horror and humor is central to understanding the ways in which the positive and negative grotesque interact. It functions as more than a literary trope and begins to denote relations of power through the carnivalesque. The carnivalesque cannot, however, exist without cosmic terror. Cosmic terror is the fear of the infinitely powerful, that which cannot be overcome by force (Dentith 241). For religion it is a higher being, for nature it is the elemental catastrophe, for humans it is the governing institution. These terrors are a means for control, an omniscient presence to guide human behavior through fear of punishment.

True to the grotesque, the terror of the cosmos is countered by the carnivalesque. It is a time of blasphemy, of masquerade and merry making, of feasting and fools. The carnivalesque is suspended in time and removed from the trepidations of reality (McWilliam 220). It often involves colorful and ornate clothing, protruding masks, and satire. Kings become fools and fools kings! Carnivale occurs in a liminal space, one that is temporary and peripheral to the lived world: It is a simulacrum (McWilliam 220, Russo 5). The carnivale flips the social script, makes the world topsy-turvy. It is a means to relieve the pressure of terror, to remove, if even for a moment, the weight of authoritative control by disarming it through farcicality. The dualistic world of the carnivalesque, both terror and laughter, expresses a distinct social commentary and subversive political tool, giving the grotesque critical implications in its application.

### *The New Bodily Canon*

In order to understand the grotesque in all its paradoxes and ironies, it is useful to identify what the grotesque is not. During the Enlightenment, people began to view the body in a new way; the new bodily canon, as Simon Dentith calls it, is one in which bodies are closed off, sleek,

autonomous, inert, and impenetrable (Dentith 228; McWilliam 218; Russo 63). This new body moderates corporal functions and orifices, calls itself complete and whole as an individual entity with no relation to the world or others. This new body has definite beginnings and endings. The modern body speaks for itself and not its location or community, distinguishing itself by its unique characteristics and its customization. In the modern canon, duality is lost; death cannot be accompanied by birth, fear is separate from laughter, destruction leaves no hope for regeneration (Dentith 230). The mechanic overtakes the organic and the mind takes precedence over the body. The individual is therefore a product of their own making which rejects the social and political implications of power the grotesque attempts to critique.

### *Critiques and Criticism*

While the grotesque can serve as a liberating literary device, it is also troubling for many scholars in its use of bodily aesthetics. Disability, in particular, has been co-opted by the grotesque to serve as a metaphor for otherness, isolation, misfortune, and alterity without considering disabled embodiment as a political position (Mitchell and Snyder, *The Body and Physical Difference* 64). These metaphorical representations translate into societal expectations in which all disability becomes equated with tragedy and stigma. Additionally, by using disability as metaphor the grotesque aestheticizes the social and cultural significance of disability and reduces it to a synecdoche of universal bodily difference. As Rosemarie Garland-Thomson writes, "the visibly disabled body intrudes on our routine visual landscape and compels our attention, often obscuring the personhood of its bearer" (*Freakery* 20). Similarly, by focusing on the body alone, the grotesque loses focus; the abatement of a wholistic embodiment to an image of singular corporal difference removes the subversive potential of the grotesque and therefore undoes itself.

The grotesque also comes under some scrutiny for the ways morality is mapped onto characters with atypical bodies, usually indicting ethical or spiritual deterioration. These characters are pathologized and used as a warning to others against contagious immorality or are on a quest to cure their physical state. Again, the grotesque as a physical marker dislocates the identity politics tied to disabled or queer embodiments and overlooks the individual in the process of symbolic representation.

### **Disability Studies**

Disability studies is an academic discipline that engages with the repercussions of disability as both a medicalized and social construct, analyzing social and political effects accompanying disabled embodiments. It operates in many arenas of activism, academia, and the arts as a means for discrediting stigmatizing representations of impaired persons and challenging hegemonic ableism. It has successfully played a part in transforming institutional access, public policy, and the treatment of people with disabilities in many instances but continues to work for these changes as both physical and social barriers persist.

Disability studies has taken issue with the representation of disabled bodies in film and literature as common tropes have emerged that demonize disability as deviant. The images of atypical bodies often manifest themselves in the form of the demonic cripple, the obsessive avenger, the charity cripple, or the super crip. The demonic trope is determined to embody the essence of villainy, the avenger must seek poetic justice for their embodied state, the charity character is one of goodness and exists through selfless apology, and the super crip rises above their circumstances against all odds (Berger 184-188). These archetypes are troubling and are therefore troubled by disability studies.

The freak show, the stage set for *Geek Love*, has a contentious role to play in the stigmatization of disabled bodies that disability studies takes up. It reinforces the stigmatized gaze on the atypical body and sensationalizes the “freaks” as attractions, commodifying and capitalizing on the devalued image of the “cast” (Backstrom 683; Berger 62; Braddock and Parish 38). It profited off the symbols and images of the exotic and the uncanny, thus allowing public collective looking into the private lives and bodies of the “freaks” (Adams 10; Bogdan 3; Garland-Thomson, *Freakery* 4). This includes a racialized component where people of color from colonized countries, including the United States, were marketed as “cannibals and savages” and joined the ranks among the “freaks” (Clare 71). The stigmatization of impaired bodies operates on a public platform in the form of a show, creating possibilities of reclamation, though perhaps unmet, by validating and consolidating disabled embodiment as material and real (Goffman 114). The freak show, in turn, is fraught with grotesque negotiations of reinforcing social power and exploitation while simultaneously subverting the norm and providing an avenue for agency.

Dwarfism, in particular, has an intimate history with voyeurism. In the eighteenth-century people with dwarfism were exchanged and valued as pets, gifts, and magical creatures among powerful elites (Adams 248; Adelson, n.p.; Thompson 2). This evolved into an aggrandized representation of little people as noble, often parading around in expensive clothing and pompous attire. The masquerading performance of people with dwarfism evolved as royal courts diminished and turned to entertainment through the freak show. In the carnival and circus settings the performance of little people adopted a celebrity-like novelty based on their stature which has carried over into modern media representations and demand for little people performers (Backstrom 687).

## *Crip Theory*

Crip theory emerges from disability studies and centers disability as a way of producing knowledge about embodiment and identity, as well as undoing binary classifications of ablebodiedness to explore various levels of being beyond “able” or “disabled” (Egner 161; McRuer 166). Crip theory is critical of identity politics and formations, analyzing the way disability as both an identity and discipline are informed by inclusions and exclusions (Kafer 15).

In this project, the action of challenging binary thinking about disability will be called *cripping* as a way to indicate the action of destabilizing normative cultural assumptions about ablebodiedness. Carrie Sandahl definition is, “Crippling spins mainstream representations or practices to reveal ablebodied assumptions and exclusionary effects” (37). It is a means of expanding imagined futures for disabled subjects through an intersectional framework of gender, race, sexual orientation, ability, class, and nation. The naming of crip theory is a move to reclaim a crippled identity, which is one that resists internalized oppressions and forges both a pride and a politics (Clare 70). It makes visible compulsory ablebodiedness and analyzes how ability operates as a nonidentity category because it is assumed to be a cultural norm and attempts to undermine these assumptions.

## **Queer Theory**

Existing as a product of poststructuralist critical thinking, queer theory, in part, aims to make the unintelligible intelligible. Queer theory has a deep interest in destabilizing gender, sexuality, and hegemonic identity construction, in addition to questioning larger heteronormative discourses. It critically engages with a specific process of denaturalization, with ties to stigmatized populations, AIDS/HIV histories in the United States, and intersectional analytics of

gender and sexuality, as well as bodily pleasures and desires. It is also interested in challenging colonial histories, a vein from which many societal practices take their origins, including slavery and racism, as well as nationalism and migration.

There is a distinction between queer as a political identity and the action of queering. The political identity is not demarcated positively, but is positioned against the normative and troubles dominant hermeneutics (Halperin 62). It is what Jose Muñoz calls disidentification: a counter-identification that is intersectional and interlocking, permitting multiple identities simultaneously (8). Gloria Anzaldúa warns that queer as a universal identity marker can be a “false unifying umbrella” that unites allies when needed but “homogenizes, erases our differences” and she advocates for the confrontation of oppressed identities and exploited histories rather than one understanding of a queer identity (250). Queerness, in these terms, must be critical of itself and be aware of the power structures employed in identity making (McRuer 152). This means that a queer political identity should aim to efface racist, sexist, classist, ableist, and any other oppression in its construction. Therefore, a queer identity must deconstruct powers of exploitation in order to establish and create itself.

The practice of deconstructing language, norms, and paradigms makes queer theory a useful tool to use to reinterpret and reconstruct literary representations; it is what will be referred to as queering. To queer is to “open up the field of possibility ... without dictating which kinds of possibilities ought to be realized” (J. Butler, viii). In other words, queering aims to denaturalize, deconstruct, and decenter hegemonic categories through critical engagement and analysis, both within and beyond gender and sexuality (Fotopoulou 25; Sedgwick 8). Using queer theory to queer, or to find queer potential, allows us to deconstruct and reconstruct unstable categories of difference in order to make new meaning of those differences.

It is not my intention to appropriate or erase the historical and political importance of queer theory and wish to avoid the conflation of queer with abjection, for when “we value difference by ‘queering’ difference, we inadvertently devalue –by coopting– the queer” (Free 427). Work done by Black feminist scholars, postcolonial scholars, Chicana feminist scholars, and other feminist projects has taken up the task of deconstructing gender and sexuality which informs the methodology of this paper. I wish to read queerly and analytically using queer theory as a framework for exploring possibilities outside of a regulated hegemonic discourse of the body as a means for expanding the way Katherine Dunn’s characters negotiate their social position through a queer and crippled subjectivity.

Alison Kafer’s *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, allows for the interrogation of futurity and embodiment for the disabled subject through a merging of queer theory and disability studies and is positioned to critique traditional notions of grotesque disabled bodies. It challenges heteronormative binaries enforced by compulsory ablebodiedness and puts queer and crip movements in conversation with one another in hopes of achieving social justice. The interdisciplinarity of Kafer’s work is employed in this paper to destabilize popular cultural narratives in order to queer and crip the discourse of the literary grotesque.

## BACKGROUND

*Geek Love* was published in 1989 amidst immense social and legislative change in the United States. The political climate of the previous decade was marked by disability rights movements while simultaneously fraught with the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The historical moment these two events occur in undoubtedly informs the writing and reading of *Geek Love*. That disability studies and gay and lesbian studies emerge at the same time is significant, especially when analyzing the social commentary the novel offers. By being formed and informed by each other, disability and LGBT+ movements become entangled in ways that inform a queer and crip reading of the text.

Katherine Dunn undoubtedly incorporates elements from her social and political environment in this work. *Geek Love* revolves around bodily difference and disability in ways that address, parody, and reify discourse surrounding civil rights, social interactions, and nationalistic attitudes of the time. The disability rights movement and the way disability is used throughout the novel are in conversation with one another that includes queer bodies and destabilizing hegemonic discourses. Looking at the events during the writing of *Geek Love* gives readers a better sense of the political impact the novel had and continues to have.

In 1981 AIDS was first formally reported as an epidemic of “cellular-immune dysfunction” by the Center for Disease Control in their Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (CDC). This classified the disease as communicable through common exposure, primarily sexual contact. Inciting homophobic moral panic, AIDS quickly became referred to as a “gay disease” as referenced by its initial medical naming: Gay-Related Immune Deficiency (GRID) (P. Butler,

99). With a failure to respond to the crisis, the 1984 Democratic National Convention held an AIDS March, calling for action from the President; it is not until a year later that United States President Ronald Reagan publicly acknowledges the HIV/AIDS epidemic, only to speak at length about it in 1987.

The disability rights movement made vigilant progress during the 1980s alongside the calamity of HIV/AIDS. Widespread protesting of public transportation resulted in the formation of Americans Disabled for Accessible Public Transit (ADAPT) in 1983 which worked to make public transportation accessible to all patrons. In 1984 the Civil Rights Restoration Act was passed which sought to overturn discrimination against anyone based on race, sex, ethnicity, or disability by federally funded agencies. Additionally the question of whether people with contagious diseases, like tuberculosis, are protected under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act came before the Supreme Court in 1987, prompting HIV/AIDS lawyers and activist to become invested in the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (Mayerson n.p.).

These movements are not the only instances where queer and crip histories overlap. Individuals with non-normative gender expressions and sexualities have historically been categorized as medically disabled (Egner 163; Clare 96). Homosexuality was considered a psychiatric disorder; gender deviance is still pathologized under labels like “gender dysphoria” or “gender identity disorder”; and intersex folk continue to experience the repercussions of the pathologization of their bodies. There is also a social tendency to overlook or ignore the sexuality of those who are disabled, particularly if they are queer subjects (Clare 112). The medicalization of queer bodies as disabled is troubled by the access and limitations those medical categorizations create, the ADA being liberatory and detrimental in its creation (Puar 49).

The timeline of these two movements converge and raise the question as to why they appear separately in feminist disciplines. Queer and crip are closely connected, “cousins” as Eli Clare puts it, and share critical contributions to reshaping social binaries (70). This paper will utilize the two in tandem to examine the ways crip theory and queer theory can be coalitioned to reread the grotesque in *Geek Love*.

## ANALYSIS

### **Inner Frame - History of the Fabulon**

The inner frame of this analysis will look at the events of the Fabulon as told by Oly, which all take place in the past. She includes stories her father told her as a child, as well as shared family histories and her own experiences. This narration is intended to be for her daughter, Miranda, who does not know that Oly is her mother or that the stories Oly tells are part of her family history. This narration of the past catches readers up to what they have missed in the novel's present, which will be discussed in the outer frame. As such, the inner frame of *Geek Love* allows Oly to narrate the past, while also informing the present. As we shall see, this form of narration, as well as the history of the Binewski family, creates a site for queer and crip interventions on the literary grotesque.

### *Bodily Difference*

*Geek Love* begins by focusing on the Binewski family's celebration of bodily difference by retelling how the children were produced. The use of "illicit and prescription drugs, insecticides, and eventual radioisotopes" result in a son with fins instead of limbs, twin daughters conjoined at the waist, a third dwarf child with pink eyes and a hunched back, and the youngest son who appears all but normal but has fantastic telekinetic powers. Grotesque fusions are clearly at play here: Arty appears both boy and fish, Chick's telekinetic power both corporal and metaphysical, and the twins both singular and plural. These are the children that survived, the others on display for safekeeping and ticket sales in preservation jars. The second generation of

Binewskis displays similarly grotesque corporality as Miranda represents a fusion between human and animal with her corkscrew tail and Mumpo is an example of grotesque excess.

The Binewski family queers the culturally and discursively constructed nature of the body by desiring embodied difference and devaluing normalcy. Oly and her family regularly reinforce the idea that normality is boring and unimpressive. She says, “We are masterpieces. Why would we want to change into assembly line items?” (282). The use of “norm” as an insult is pervasive throughout the novel and is used to rescind conventional attitudes towards compulsive ablebodiedness, in turn queering the relationship between typical and atypical embodiments. Arty transfers the fear associated with disability and disfigurement to normalcy by saying, “I get glimpses of the horror of normalcy. Each of these innocents on the street is engulfed by a terror of their own ordinariness” (223). Stigma, from inside the Fabulon, exists on the outside as normalcy.

Stigma works to “other” the Binewski family, who occupy a liminal space in their national tour of the United States; they are simultaneously everywhere and nowhere. Oly reflects, “It may seem odd that I have no idea what town we were in, but when the show was alive and functioning [...] it felt like the whole world and it always looked the same no matter where we were” (246). Operating in this in-between space allows them to subvert the normal/abnormal binary through a carnivalesque celebration of their embodiment. The carnivalesque is a temporary space in time, much like the traveling Fabulon, where social order is reversed, reflected in the desirability of disability counter to larger cultural narratives outside of the carnival. The Fabulon is the literal and figurative grotesque carnivale.

The grotesque carnivalesque is a time of reversal, which Dunn enacts through queering the social worth traditionally placed on normality. By inverting the norm, she subsequently cripps

it by making disability a monetarily and socially valuable identity. This is effectively executed in the family's premature disavowal of Chick when, based on his seemingly insignificant embodiment, they plan to abandon him. Crystal Lil mourns Chick's normalcy only to celebrate his "freakishness" when it is revealed. Catherine Spooner, in *Contemporary Gothic*, notes that the treatment of Chick's embodiment is an inversion to the way society has treated disability (72). This example also serves to critique the link between the appearance of bodies as being indicative of ability. It highlights harmful assumptions about the link between physical and mental ability status and the suppositions about bodies based on their aesthetics. That is to say that when Dunn writes that Chick is "just a regular... regular baby" and correlates this to being disposable, she marks normalcy as being less valuable than difference (64). It is a rejection of what Rosemarie Garland-Thomson calls the "normate," which describes "the corporeal incarnation of culture's collective, unmarked, normative characteristics" (*Extraordinary Bodies* 8). The treatment of Chick's normate body cripps a normative identity by moving it from desirable to detestable, thus challenging its positivity and participating in a grotesque inversion of ableism.

There is a more complicated shift in the crippling of normalcy than denouncing a *démodé* binary of normal/freak. Dunn does not simply challenge the binary by reversing it, in fact, she replaces it all together. The characters in *Geek Love* talk about bodily difference in terms of degrees, suggesting a spectrum rather than set categories of either norm or freak. Oly's self-worth reflects the dismantling of the binary as she describes her differences as "commonplace" and a "disappointment" compared to her siblings (8). By contrasting the value placed on differences, our understanding of embodiment is further challenged by stratifying the complexity of bodies as being somewhere on a spectrum of desirability rather than simply reinforcing

another (though inverted) binary. In so doing, not only does Dunn queer and subvert the norm/freak binary, she crips and undoes it.

The purposeful breeding of the Binewski children combats the pervasive cultural fear of offspring being born with disfigurements or disabilities and is a move that undoes traditional anxieties about birth “defects”. Read through the grotesque, this cultural anxiety takes the form of cosmic terror, a force outside the control of the everyday person. In many ways it is the fear of the familiar: that uncontrollable bodily difference could affect the individual self. Disability scholars have talked at length about the distancing of the disabled subject as “other” in order for non-disabled subjects to dissociate from the realities of illness, aging, or disability and, therefore, the vulnerability of all bodies to impairment (Morris 68; Shakespeare 231) . The celebration of gestational difference is a queer, crip, and grotesque disruption of hegemonic reproductive control and demystifies the “horror” of bodies that fall outside traditional categories of normal. Dunn pushes this anxiety further through Oly’s artificial insemination using her brother’s sperm, showcasing inbreeding as a social taboo whose primary concern is “abnormal” reproduction. Because Miranda is a pedigree Binewski, her tail holds significantly more value far beyond body positivity and acceptance; it becomes symbolic of the Binewski heritage and grotesque collective history.

### *Collective Identity and American Individualism*

Al’s plan to procreate a freak show has been noted as a means to queer cultural panic about working class families and debase twentieth century eugenic practices (Sullivan 412). Oly, before relinquishing Chick, hopes that her letter of abandonment will portray that he is of “good genetic stock,” indicating that eugenic thinking is still prevalent and informs the reversal of what

“good” biology looks like (66). She hopes that the language she uses will indicate that Chick’s parents are educated, which speaks to the pervasive pro-eugenic argument concerning the dangers of a hyper fertile, immoral lower class. Dunn concurrently participates in and inverts eugenic discourse by suggesting that their class standing is cause for concern, while also reversing which phenotypical genetics are desirable. There is a compromise between the notions of “fit” parents and “healthy” children: half of the eugenic argument is reinforced through class anxieties and the genetic argument is undone by parodying the valuation of certain bodies. Consequently, Dunn rejects latent cultural narratives of eradicating bodily difference but plays into stereotypes of working-class eugenic thinking. This overlap of disability and class informs Al Binewski’s breeding scheme from the start, indicating a reoccurring theme of queering/cripping grotesque bodies within the confines of a capitalistic system.

Al’s interest in procreating a freak show is situated in his working-class identity and represents American ideologies of “pulling yourself up by your bootstraps”. The entrepreneurial spirit of the Binewski family business has been interpreted as the cultivation of American individualism (Warren 325). They present themselves as an “All American” nuclear family, pulling themselves out of poverty based on their unique and individual contributions. Dunn describes Al as “a standard-issue Yankee, set on self-determination and independence” traits that inform Arty’s ethics and trade (7). Victoria Warren, in her essay “American Tall Tale/Tail: Katherine Dunn’s *Geek Love* and the Paradox of American Individualism,” points out that the marriage of the Binewski parents conjoins traditional American cast types: Lil, the wealthy, well-bred Boston aristocrat, and Al the rough, self-made man (325). In the end, though, the facade of the Binewskis as “all American” collapses on itself outside the discursive bubble of the *Fabulon*. It is then that the American tradition of tall tales in the form of storytelling becomes a

grotesque solution to maintaining the family chronicles, despite existing outside of American norms. Creating collective histories that cross individual boundaries of identity is a queer intervention on the grotesque interconnectedness of generational epistemologies. It is more than a grotesque linkage, it is the preservation of a queer alternate history.

Told as part history and part present, *Geek Love* relies on a collective retelling of the Binewskis themselves. As Oly narrates her time in the Fabulon, we get a sense that her identity and her siblings' identities are wrapped up in their being Binewskis. Their grandfather and founder of the Fabulon is referred to often throughout the novel, his urn being bolted to the roof of their traveling caravan (7). The grandfather's legacy is relayed through Al's storytelling to the children, which cultivates the Binewski identity as multigenerational and linked to the traditions of the Fabulon. With the Fabulon having been bequeathed to Al, and the children as a means to save the family business, we see a transfer from the individual self to the collective unit. The shift toward a queer shared identity disrupts the narrative of American individualism, but the ties are not fully severed. American capitalist influences are at the center of the family's lives, making the turn away from individualism incomplete. This proves to be another example of queer and crip interventions on grotesque elements of the narrative which are constrained by larger national frameworks.

In her final letter to her daughter Miranda, Oly writes:

I hope that someday you'll come collect us all from the shelves of the vault. Take down Arty and Chick and Papa and the twins, and all that's left of the Jar Kin, and, by the, Lily and me. Open our metal jars and pour all the Binewski dust together into that big battered loving cup that first held only Grandpa B. Bolt us to the hood of your traveling machine and take us on the road again. (348)

The family unit may be read as distinctly patriotic, as Rachel Adams suggests in her essay, "An American Tail: Freaks, Gender, and the Incorporation of History in Katherine Dunn's 'Geek Love,'" but the American nuclear family does not solidify their collective history within a broader national context (281). As such, their alternative family history is erased within stories of nation building. Participating in capitalism is not enough to normalize their identity within able-bodied America, resulting in the marginalization of their story. The text supports this through journalist Norval Sanders, who routinely examines and reports on the Fabulon. Sanders' reporting represents the documentation of official history, whereas Oly's narration acts as generationally passed down alternative history. This juxtaposition highlights the contentions between the history of the United States and the history of the freak show which results in the displacement of the Binewski family within the larger cultural narrative. The dislocation of the family's narrative parallels their isolation to the Fabulon, hidden away like secrets in a grotto. Their attempts to maneuver within American society by adopting and negotiating national values are fruitless; the children are not "ideal" candidates as their worth is tied to their productive capacity under capitalism. Their mother says, "What greater gift could you offer your children than an inherent ability to earn a living just by being themselves?" which reinforces their creation as products of a capitalistic system. In the United States, however, productivity, efficiency and accomplishment are regimented by economic imperatives that tend to exclude disabled subjects (Kafer 39). The Binewskis may represent traditional American values of entrepreneurship, family focus, and tall tales, but they are not valued by the national narrative of progress and capitalism.

Bodily differences specifically position the Binewski children at the margins of public society while their trade invites "norms" to the center of their personal lives. A dichotomy

emerges between being hypervisible in the Fabulon versus the desire for their public invisibility. There is an invitation of the public to the private sphere, meaning that “norms” are welcome in the closed off world of the Fabulon, but this is not reciprocated. Interestingly, this one-sided relationship is depicted in Vern Bogner’s attempt to murder the children at a public shopping mall. Oly laughs that it is “Funny how target potential became a status symbol among us” (85). The desire to eradicate, and simultaneously stare at, the children depicts the power of the onlooker to surveil and punish. Vern is appalled by the Binewski children and calls them “things,” but later seeks out the Fabulon after his botched suicide attempt. Now called Bagman, Vern embodies the mobility from the outside in, from the public sphere to the private, but not the inverse. The gaze and mobility from the public to the private, from society to the Fabulon, situates the Binewski family within the social structure, but not of it. This indicates that cultural influences enter the Fabulon, but that the queer and crip challenges to those influence do not leave the realm of the carnival.

### *Hierarchies of Difference*

Despite the implementation of a more progressive and fluid spectrum, the freak/norm distinction does not dissolve completely. It could be argued that Dunn participates in what is sometimes called an “Oppression Olympics” where there is a ranking of who is more oppressed, or in this case disabled. While the spectrum proves to break an ableist binary of distinct categorization, appointing worth based on degrees of difference reiterates hierarchies and moves away from crip and queer principles. Oly’s wish to be “more special” denotes a type of social mobility associated with bodily difference and therefore institutes dynamics of power (34). As if

to acknowledge the danger of and resist a ranking of disability, Dunn presents the cult of Arturism to forewarn against the institutionalization of bodily hierarchies.

Arty founds the Arturan Cult as a means to exploit norms who desire to be different as a means to achieve the peace and beauty they associate with Arty's limbless embodiment. It is what he ironically calls "corrective surgery," a direct reference to the medicalization of disability (231). In electing to participate, his disciples, the Admitted, slowly undergo amputations of fingers, toes, arms, and legs, until they reach a state where all that remains are their heads and torsos. The Admitted undergo processes of regeneration through coming undone and becoming something new, a grotesque transformation to achieve full metamorphosis. As the amputations progress, the Admitted see themselves as becoming more sanctified and climbing a social hierarchy of embodiment. Readers, though, may be unsettled to learn that those who reach the highest rung of Arturism are sent away and lobotomized. Katherine Hayles, in "Postmodern Parataxis: Embodied Texts, Weightless Information," describes the Admitted as static, desexualized, and anonymous by the end of the process, "as close to objects as human subjects could get" (23). This suggests that social hierarchies of bodily difference result in dangerous outcomes where the body becomes primary to the person, producing a harmful symptom of dehumanization and social stigma. The carnivalesque inversion of disability as desirable, as well as overturned narratives of cure, present the Admitted as a parodied version of what compulsory ablebodiedness says of disability; disability in the Fabulon is no longer to be overcome, but something to obtain. When able bodies are hierarchically privileged, disabled subjects are expected to want to achieve ablebodiedness. Dunn mocks this ableist notion with crip grotesque humor through the Admitted, highlighting the absurdity of overcoming our embodiments.

It is here, however, that I raise issue with Dunn's use of acquired disability in relationship to congenital bodily difference. Her work implies that inborn disability is more authentic than those that are acquired using memorable lines like, "a true freak cannot be made. A freak must be born" (20). With the value placed throughout the novel on the status of the freak, it reads as if those not born with bodily difference are somehow inferior to those characters born with a disability. It begins to take the shape of biological determinism, a parodied one albeit, where freakishness is tied to biology. Oly wonders if her daughter has a genetic tendency to admire deformity, as if she has "some hooked structure in her cells that twist her toward all that the world calls freakish" (15). To claim genetic entitlement to freakishness, which in this case has status attached to it, is compliant to eugenic thinking. It counteracts her warning against the danger of hierarchies of difference, as well as suggesting that acquired embodiments are inherently inferior to those born with them. This situates disability into distinct categories of difference, acquired vs. congenital, and recreates more binaries and therefore systems of power. In this lies a grotesque paradox of constructing and deconstructing notions of the freak, being simultaneously liberating and oppressive. The carnivalesque reversal of the binary reveals the unnatural categorizations of bodies, as well as unnatural systems of power through hierarchies. By making the familiar strange using grotesque reversal, we see how strange the familiar really is.

### *Patterns of Patriarchy*

Although there are some issues reinforced through Arturism, the cult acts as a site to crip a traditional grotesque reading of disability as morally defunct. In fact, the Admitted seek out amputation as a way to purify themselves, reminiscent of a sublimating baptism. Arty claims at

the beginnings of his oracle act and formation of the cult, "The more deformed we are, the higher our supposed sanctity" (114). Dunn unwinds grotesque tales of immorality and resituates disability as being revered and almost holy rather than horrific and adulterated. Arty plays the role of the prophet not to feed into historical underpinnings of the mythically disabled but resists it. Arty as prophet crips the trope by removing its power to control disabled bodies to controlling the nondisabled body. Like others, it is the grotesque role reversal of the carnivalesque where fools become kings and kings become fools.

Dunn's use of the prophet figure is not restricted to Arty and also takes shape during Elly's resistance to her older brother's control. She becomes the babbling Cassandra of Greek mythology when Arty's desperate attempt to control her results in a forced lobotomy. This comes as a result of the twin's enactment of their sexuality, deciding to profit from sex work and the fetishization of their bodies. Dunn explores the queering of sex work as agential and existing outside the capital regime that drives Arty and Al's exploits. Their piano teacher and eventual procurer notes, "I wouldn't have thought that you needed money. It would appear that you are very comfortably provided for" indicating that the decision to engage in sex work is not purely monetarily motivated. In this way, a queering of sex work emerges, one that is distinctly crip as Elly and Iphy reason that, "Most of the guys wonder what it would be like to fuck us. So, I figure, why not capitalize on that curiosity?" (207). Not only does this reassemble disabled subjects as sexual but seems to take a pro-sex side to the feminist sex wars of the 1970s and 80s.

Arty asserts patriarchal dominance over Elly and Iphy, outraged that they would engage in sex work. He gives them to Bagman who repeatedly rapes the women until they become pregnant. The terror the women endure at the hands of Arty and Bagman contrasts the consensual and crip sex work they engaged in, furthering the discussion about the relationship

between sex and violence. Luce Irigaray's argument in "Women on the Market," states that "women's role as fetish-objects [ . . . ] are the manifestation and the circulation of a power of the Phallus, establishing relationships of men with each other" (183). By giving his sisters away and thereby controlling their sexuality, circuits of power are redrawn to reflect patriarchy within the Fabulon. Katherine Weese writes of this that, "Dunn's depictions of Arty and the Fabulon, with all their attention to the carnival spirit and the grotesque body, undermine a facile application of Bakhtin's writings to *Geek Love*, showing how carnival fails to invert norms and in fact reinforces them, especially in the arena of traditional gender relations" (351). This interpretation of Arty reveals that the Fabulon, though a literal carnival, may not achieve the subversive reversal of the Bakhtinian carnival, even with queer and crip interventions. Arty's control over his sisters and position as patriarch is stratified when Al refuses to help his daughters escape Bagman and boils their hesitation down to "girlish hesitation" (251). Arty is distinctly aware of his role within their family unit, asserting his ownership by proclaiming, "And don't forget, I was the first keeper. I'm the oldest, the son, the Binewski! This whole show is mine, the whole family" (103). This entitlement delineates a capitalist and gendered claim to the Fabulon, but also the precarity between who can be a subject and who becomes an object under patriarchal regimes.

The relationship between Chick and Arty speaks to the objectification of people under patriarchal systems of power. Chick begins to assist Arty in the amputations of the Admitted by using his telekinetic power to relieve the followers of any pain. He is given to the resident surgeon who takes him on as an understudy upon Arty's demands (250). Eventually assuming the role of head surgeon, Chick becomes overworked and is forced to participate in Elly's lobotomy despite being deeply disturbed by it. Arty's control over Chick mirrors the patriarchal

control over their siblings. This control breeds resentment and results in Iphy killing both herself and Elly, a devastating loss Chick is unable to handle. His grief and resentment towards Arty is what leads to the Fabulon's fiery end.

Al Benewski, as initial patriarch, sets the patriarchal model that Arty inherits. Arty is the only child given free range to expand and customize his show where Elly and Iphy must stick to a routine schedule and perform the same act repeatedly. Oly, too, in her hopes of contributing more to the business, is discouraged from venturing outside the vocal trade by her father. The Binewskis are a stand in for the all-American family and act as a microcosm where patriarchy is disguised by the grotesque. Arty's claim to divinity and the subversion of disabled desirability distracts from his patriarchal control and capitalistic driven domination over the other members of the Fabulon. The inner narrative is crippled and queered in so many seemingly liberating ways that the byproduct is a masquerading of oppression through progressive neoliberalism. To say it differently, grotesque bodies, imagery, and location create transgressive counter narratives to the way disability is traditionally perceived at the expense of recreating gendered hierarchies and oppressions.

In the end, the inner narrative resists the "personal tragedy" of disability and refuses to enforce the harmful normalization that disability must be overcome. It undoes the pathologization of disabled embodiments and inverts cultural constructions of normalcy using grotesque bodies. The history of the Fabulon, nonetheless, perpetuates images of the nuclear family as a heteronormative social unit with distinct gender dynamics and power structures. It operates under the premise of the self-made man where capitalism is the locomotive that drives the Fabulon cross country. Though it uses the literary grotesque as a site to queer and crip bodily

narratives, the subversions Dunn attempts occur within a patriarchal framework at the expense of women and proves to be a potentially moot point.

### **Outer Frame - Notes for Now**

The analysis above looks at the inner frame of the novel which tracks the history of the Fabulon and is used to supplement important information for understanding the outer narrative and the present relationships between Oly, Miranda, and Miss Lick. The central focus of the outer frame encapsulates Miranda's decision to keep or remove her tail; Miranda confides in Oly that a wealthy woman, Miss Lick, has offered her a substantial sum of money to amputate her tail. This troubles Oly, who sets out to befriend Miss Lick in order to prevent her from persuading Miranda to take the offer. This portion of the analysis is interested in the interactions between class, gender, and identity and how queering and crippling their representations plays out in *Geek Love*.

### *Controlling Bodies*

The outer frame deals specifically with issues of desire, objectification, class, gender, and embodiment through Miranda's decision-making process. For Oly, Miranda's tail is a legacy distinctly tied to the Binewski tradition; for Miranda, it is a means of income at the local Glass House gentlemen's club. There is a parallel in the voyeurism between the Glass House and the Fabulon, but the gaze Miranda is subjected to is distinctly tied to fetishization and male sexual desire. Miss Lick, a self-proclaimed philanthropist, sees the sexual appeal as related to bodily difference. She regards male desire as a burden to the women who work at the Glass House and hopes that by removing any visible distinction of sex or gender that the women can reach their full intellectual and productive potential. Oly, aware of the class differences between Miranda

and Miss Lick, believes that all she needs to do is “interfere with Miss Lick’s finances. That if she were poor [...] she wouldn’t be able to go on with her projects” and looks for ways “to sabotage her pocketbook” (164). The power structure becomes clearly classed and tied to capitalism, with Miss Lick’s consumption of Miranda and other women as a type of commodification of bodies. In fact, Miss Lick “collects” the women she works with, taping their procedures and putting a price tag on their modifications.

Miranda’s work at the Glass House invites a multilayered voyeurism of sexual object and bodily curiosity. Her overlapping subjectivity as a woman and a person with “special” embodiment interlock and exploit simultaneously occurring gazes. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson describes it as, “If the male gaze makes the normative female a sexual spectacle, then the stare sculpts the disabled subject into a grotesque spectacle” (*Extraordinary Bodies* 26). Miranda’s work at the gentleman’s club profits from the sexual and uncanny desire to look on by others, one that Miss Lick wishes to obliterate. It is reminiscent of the ableist gaze in the Fabulon but now takes the form of the sexual gaze in the Glasshouse, both of which can be interpreted as exploitative or a capitalist reclamation of the public gaze.

The medical gaze makes an appearance alongside the public gaze when Miranda discloses that it is her dream to become a medical artist. When Oly and Miranda spend time together, it is so that Miranda can draw Oly as a medicalized subject. Miranda sketches Oly for practice, which marks a shift in the medical treatment of bodies and analyzing bodies within medical standards. Dunn takes this medical shift further through Miss Lick’s desire to modify women’s bodies and taping their procedures as a sort of fetishized medical gaze.

## *Overcoming Gender*

Miss Lick's character poses a troubling intervention in terms class as well as gender which is mapped onto crip and queer bodies. A wealthy upper class, white woman, Miss Lick participates in the gaze under the guise of "cure". Lick believes she is assisting the women she "sponsors" by supporting them financially and socially. She uses power and punishment to make the women undesirable. Tied specifically to gender, her purpose is:

To liberate women who are liable to be exploited by male hungers. The exploitable woman are, in Miss Lick's view, the pretty ones. She feels great pity for them. [...] If all these pretty women could shed the traits that made men want them (their prettiness) they would no longer depend on their own exploitability but would use their talents and intelligence to become powerful." (162)

Interestingly, Dunn queers the notion of "cure" from a disability standpoint and translates it to gender. We see this in the extreme measures Miss Lick goes to overcome sex, gender, and implied connections to beauty. The young women Miss Lick "treats" are transformed in various ways: some are medically manipulated through their thyroid to gain immense amounts of weight, many receive mastectomies, most are rid of their hair, and one has her clitoris removed and vagina sewn closed. Miss Lick exerts power over the women by using her class privilege to experiment with post-gender modifications of the body using disability and disfigurement. By controlling the biological features of these women, Miss Lick assumes control of their bodies and gains political power through ownership and indebtedness. It is disguised as altruistic, but Miss Lick is motivated by the desire to destroy and recreate her pupils.

Miss Lick's intervention assumes that gender is debilitating for women, whereas disability is liberating and allows for class mobility. She says to Oly, "What fools might consider

a handicap is actually an enormous gift. What you've accomplished with your voice might never have been possible if you'd been normal" (162). She therefore plays into the stereotypical cultural assumption that disability, gender, sexuality, and class are mutually exclusive and that positionality is not intersectional. Miss Lick discloses that her pursuit of Miranda has to do with the fact that Miranda has "made the tail erotic rather than a disfigurement" (335). She is conscious that queer bodies can be sexual but is contending that debilitation cures these bodies of unwanted gender-based limitations. It may appear to be a crip rewriting of attained disability when she proposes disfigurement, or even a rewriting of the narrative of cure, but upon closer analysis the cure narrative is grafted onto gender as something that needs to be overcome through disabled embodiment. In other words, Miranda's tail makes her a more valuable fetishized subject, which gives her some agency at the Glass house, but Miss Lick sees this as a detriment. Miss Lick, then, wishes to remove Miranda's tail in order to desexualize her, to the extent of being the object of fetishization, and therefore remove, or cure, her bodily difference. This does not solve representations of overcoming embodiment, it just translates the typical depiction of overcoming disability to overcoming gender difference.

### *Racialized Gender*

It should not go unnoticed that the women Miss Lick manipulates are often women of color and that their specific treatments are racialized in harmful ways. One woman, who Miss Lick considers a failure, has her thyroid removed and is described as "a dark mound of flesh" postoperative (162). Lick reminisces that she should have used acid, similar to her treatment of Carina, who is half black and half Italian (159). The clitoridectomy that is performed is on a woman described as having a "golden" skin and that Miss Lick wants to "seal her asshole" and

“stitch her mouth shut” in order to prevent her from having any kind sexual encounters (334). The closing of the orifices goes against grotesque interconnectedness and is meant to shock readers at the closing off of the body, while also perpetuating stereotypes of the hypersexual woman of color. This suggests that racialized subjects, mapped onto disabled or queer bodies, exist within the margins and occupy a distantly grotesque liminal space. Indeed, race goes largely unmentioned throughout the text, taking the form of compulsory whiteness.

Racialized gender, in this case, is a dual debilitation which must be cured and “revolves around rehabilitation to multiple social norms,” which are white and misogynistic (Puar 53). For Miss Lick, the dissociation of interlocking identities leads her to believe that race and gender can be overcome through disability or disfigurement. It is neither a queer nor crip intervention, as Miss Lick presents the post-gender, post-racial, pro-disability argument in terms of neoliberal capitalism and productivity, which essentializes normative standards of value and patriarchal control over minorities.

## CONCLUSION

The ending of both the inner and outer frame asserts a similar sentiment that queer theorist Lee Edelman makes about futurity that “there can be no future for queers” (30). Alison Kafer emphasizes for crip theory, too, that the task is to “imagine disability and disability futures otherwise, as part of other, alternate temporalities that do not cast disabled people out of time, as the sign of the future of no future” (34). It is troubling, however, that *Geek Love* leaves but one future to be imagined as the other queer and crip subjects die under systems of control. The death of the Binewskis and Mary Lick encapsulate the death of a capitalistic, patriarchal regime, suggesting that queer and crip futures cannot exist within that framework.

The move towards medicalization in both narratives showcases the shift to a medical model of disability that has been simultaneously helpful and detrimental to disability rights movements. Queer scholars have also taken up issue with the medicalization of bodies, in particular regards to intersex and transgender individuals. Miss Lick’s medical intervention on women’s bodies denotes a pathologization of gender and race as a means to counteract socialized treatments of those bodies. Miranda’s dream of becoming a medical artist and her fascination with different bodies compounds with Chick’s aid in Arty’s surgical venture, marking a distinct shift in body modification. Both narratives contribute to the final confrontation where Oly kills Miss Lick in a murder / suicide over their differences regarding Miranda’s tail. They are unclear and unsatisfying endings wrapped up in the status of medicalized bodies; both filled with violence and conflict, neither decisive nor concluding. It is Miranda’s unmade decision whether or not to keep her tail that seems most troubling in the end, leaving readers with an ethical and

social dilemma to parse through amidst the violent closing curtain of *Geek Love*. This is, perhaps, where disability studies, crip theory, and queer theory find themselves, stuck between positive and negative negotiations that medicalization creates. We must therefore continue to examine the effects medicalization has for and to our bodies.

Dunn proposes counter narratives to the culturally constructed narrative of “cure” using Arty and Miss Lick as foils for one another. Arty crip cure narratives by performing amputations on ablebodied folk where Miss Lick attempts to queer cure narratives by eradicating gender-based desire. It is problematic, however, that cure is hypermedicalized and does not reflect changing the debilitating social factors that are inflicted on different bodies. It fails to take into account the negotiations that take place for queer and crip subjects when interacting with medical authority, or the contentious histories that inform those interactions.

Dunn is careful not to rely on narrative prosthesis, by which disability is used as plot device for something else, but centers it as a political identity tied to social and cultural factors. Oly serves as the mouth piece of the novel, positioning readers within her story rather than on the outside looking in. This choice of storytelling resists the canonical tendency to gaze at disabled and queer bodies. In turn, “*Geek Love* frames its reflections on monstrosity in terms of storytelling, suggesting that in the end this discussion of monstrous being applies to narrative bodies in general” (Punday 820). Al Binewski, the “midnight gardener” of his children, also acts as author by writing their recipe and reciting a scripted existence; his storytelling of their birth and purpose shape their narratives within the larger text. Oly’s continuation of the narrative employs a type of control over Miranda, one that rooted in a family history, but one that is grounded in patriarchal control of women’s bodies. Like many of the grotesque paradoxes of *Geek Love*, it is the power of discursive technology that, “provides a means both of control and

of resistance to that control” (Worthington 115). The inner and outer narratives participate in grotesque collective storytelling that is regenerative and destructive for disabled subjects, but is constrained by larger systems of power.

In the end the use of grotesque images, settings, and interactions continue to be troubling in their representation of the disabled and queer body. The grotesque does not do a disservice in totality, but rather situates bodies to be negotiated in their social and political contexts. It invites queer and crip interventions that are themselves fraught with contradictions that can be uncomfortable to unpack. For as *Geek Love* has shown, the consequences of unpacking the grotesque in terms of a crip and queer framework necessarily requires an account of the looming systems of gendered, racialized, heteronormative ablebodiedness. However, the destabilizing of these systems may facilitate, as seen in this analysis, the reinforcement of other power structures. Therefore, the grotesque is not purely subversive in *Geek Love*, but is effective in repositioning power structures as a cyclical exercise. In focusing on disabled and different bodies, the grotesque was useful to queer and crip many of the cultural anxieties associated with the Binewskis, but in doing so shaped new powers structures. The cyclical nature of the grotesque creates an impossible deconstruction and construction of power that calls for a queer and crip intervention to resist racialized, gendered, and ablest patriarchal systems of oppression.

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