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“One of Us”

Identity and Community in Contemporary Fiction

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The essay examines the short stories of Noria Jablonski, a writer who recycles disability representations, evacuating their symbolic or metaphoric narrative functions, while retaining an awareness of those functions in order to reprise, revise, and contribute to a larger tradition of disability representation. This larger tradition includes representations of performers in the American freak shows and more recent images of disability—like that of the conjoined twin—that fascinate the American imagination. Anchored in the tradition of circulating narratives about individuals with exceptional physicalities, Jablonski’s collection, *Human Oddities*, explores both how and what stories about ‘freaks’ mean—especially to the individuals who, by virtue of their exceptional physicalities, identify with ‘freaks.’ Jablonski is one of a new group of authors who recoup disability imagery and produce important work questioning and complicating dominant understandings of disability.

I relish the knowledge that there have been people who have taken advantage of white people’s and nondisabled people’s urge to gawk. I love that disabled people at one time were paid to flaunt and exaggerate their disabilities. At the same time I hate how the freak show reinforced the damaging lies about disabled people and nondisabled people of color ... Are there kinds of freakdom ... that we need to bear witness to rather than incorporate into our pride?

Eli Clare, *Exile and Pride*

The above epigraph, from Eli Clare’s *Exile and Pride*, articulates one author’s complex response to the history of the freak show. A transgendered poet, essayist, and activist who has cerebral palsy, Clare’s identification with individuals who worked in sideshows motivates his desire to recover accounts of these individuals’ experiences.¹ Grappling with the lack of self-writing by or accurate information about these individuals, Clare explains, “I want to hear the stories, but like the stories of other marginalized people, they were most often never told, but rather eaten up, thrown away, lost in the daily grind of survival” (78). In response to this absence, Clare recounts recorded information about events in performer lives—for example, Charles Stratton’s audience with the Queen of England—supplementing official narratives with his own speculations about their unknown, internal lives (75). Clare’s imaginative reconstruction is an

1. Gender-neutral pronouns are generally used in reference to Clare.

attempt to further understand these individuals without relying on the uncritical acceptance of the stories circulated about them in handbills produced by managers and owners. Underpinning Clare's desire to have the "stories" that have been lost is a recognition of the significance of stories for building community as well as for understanding the self; the performers' narratives become the archive that Clare consults in order to better understand his own personal history.

Clare's project of complicating and thickening the sideshow's history participates in a larger critical discourse surrounding the recovery and reevaluation of the tradition of displaying exceptional bodies. In their analyses of the freak show's cultural work and cultural significance, scholars such as Robert Bogdan, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, and Rachel Adams have attended to the discrepancy between the performer and the performance. In *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and for Profit*, Bogdan asserts that "'Freak' shows can teach us not to confuse the role a person plays with who that person really is" (10); in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, Garland-Thomson points out that what is assumed to be a "freak of nature" is really a "freak of culture" (10). Underscoring the importance of recognizing and analyzing the tradition and history of disability representation, these writers draw attention to the ways in which the disabled body is contextually constructed; additionally, each of these authors focuses on the stories and histories that have often been ignored, sanitized, and concealed. Thus, these critics recognize the freak show's injuriousness, but also its utility as an employer of disabled individuals as well as its value for understanding deployments of and responses to physical difference.²

Creative writers, too, have approached the freak show as a fruitful site for the exploration of disability history and identity. In the play *P.H.*reaks: The Hidden History of People with Disabilities*, for example, Victoria Ann Lewis and Doris Baizley confront the sideshow's legacy; in one scene, the performers articulate their frustration with the paternalism of those who insist on shutting down the sideshows. In this article I examine creative depictions of disability, like *P.H.*reaks*, that self-consciously participate in a larger corpus of disability representation. I identify a contemporary author—Noria Jablonski—who recycles depictions of disability, evacuating their symbolic or metaphoric narrative functions while retaining an awareness of those functions in order to reprise, revise, and contribute to a larger tradition of disability representation.

2. See also Adams' *Sideshow USA* as well as Cheryl Marie Wade's "Disability Culture Rap." For a critique of understandings which emphasize the positive aspects of sideshow employment, see David A. Gerber's "The 'Careers' of People Exhibited in Freak Shows."

This larger tradition includes representations of performers in the American freak shows and more recent images of disability—like that of the conjoined twin—that fascinate the American imagination. Anchored in the tradition of circulating narratives about individuals with exceptional physicalities, two of Jablonski's short stories in particular, "Solo in the Spotlight" and "One of Us" explore how and what stories about 'freaks' mean—especially to the individuals who identify with 'freaks.' Jablonski, who self-identifies as disabled, is one of a new group of authors, such as Anne Finger (whose work I discuss briefly at the conclusion of this article) and Lewis and Baizley, who complicate dominant understandings of disability, turning away from facile metaphorizations and instead developing depictions that interrogate disability identity's complex relationship to the tradition of disability representation.³

There are certainly an abundance of representational precedents for authors to draw on; one of the challenges to writing about disability is that while there is a wealth of representation, many of the available depictions lack complexity. Disability-studies scholars have identified a tradition in which disabled bodies are deployed as "always an interpretive occasion" (Garland-Thomson, *Freakery* 1), as "visible symptom[s] of social disorganization and collapse" (Mitchell, "Modernist Freaks" 348), and "as symbols of fear or pity" (Hevey 54); these scholars critique representations of disability that rely on well-worn metaphorizations and stereotypes of helplessness, passivity, and isolation. Additionally, many critiques implicitly (and at times, explicitly) call for a more realistic, more sophisticated, and perhaps more ethical disability representation. Although Jablonski is not directly answering the call to produce more positive images, her work is, in important respects, the aesthetic inheritance of a disability studies perspective that refuses many received notions of disability. As a result, "Solo in the Spotlight" and "One of Us" depict disabled characters forging their identities both in response and resistance to the communities and traditions they perceive themselves participating in.

"Solo in the Spotlight" describes an artist's development as she negotiates the roles available to her as a disabled female. However, instead of a story of an individual who insists on creating despite seemingly insurmountable obstacles, "Solo in the Spotlight" emphasizes the creative individual's simultaneous autonomy and dependence on others. The story is an unnamed narrator's reflection on a time in her childhood when her mother was dating a man called "John the Gambler." John is a significant figure in the narrator's life because of his apparent kindness to her when she is a child: he whittles figurines for her, he takes her

3. Jablonski is hard of hearing and has Meniere's Disease ("Re: Human Oddities" 1).

on outings to the boardwalk, and he buys her an expensive doll. Each of these actions ultimately contributes to the narrator's artistic development; she not only performs on the boardwalk as an adult, but John's wooden sculptures later become the material from which the narrator creates her own sculptures.

Disability is central to the narrator's experience, but Jablonski resists a depiction that would collapse the character into her impairment. Thus, while her disability is never fully disclosed, the narrator mentions that she operates her electric wheelchair with her mouth. Jablonski's elision of the specifics of the narrator's physicality is reminiscent of Hemingway's "theory of omission" in which the author withholds crucial lexical and narrative details; Jablonski's choice to omit a description of the narrator's body simultaneously draws attention to and deemphasizes it. That Jablonski treats the body like one of Hemingway's "important things" (Hemingway 3)—like the word "abortion" in "Hills Like White Elephants"—suggests the narrator's body is perhaps the most important element of the story. On the other hand, the narrator's treatment of her extraordinary physicality reminds readers that, to the narrator, her own body is exceedingly ordinary. For example, in the first paragraph, the narrator announces: "I, naturally, had no use for slippers" (Jablonski 56). The conversational tone and use of the word "naturally," suggests a familiarity that renders explanation unnecessary. Further, the term "naturally" suggests that, despite cultural constructions of some physical characteristics as "unnatural," the narrator's undisclosed condition is, for her, associated with the natural or normal.

Although the story is not strictly about the narrator's body, it is centrally concerned with how the narrator conceives of the roles available to her given her extraordinary physicality as well as her status as female. Crucially, the narrator faces obstacles because of others' understandings of her body, rather than because of her body's functioning or impairment.⁴ The narrator describes her mother's reaction when John gives the narrator a Barbie doll: her mother "looked pained ... like the time ... I asked her to paint my toenails (I've got *toes*, just not feet exactly)" (58). The narrator's request for a pedicure brings into focus the navigations she will have to perform as a female child on the journey to adulthood. That her mother appears "pained" by the child's request suggests that the narrator's attempts at the performance of femininity are unsuccessful; the request is painful to her mother in the sense that it hurts the narrator's mother to recognize the gap between what painted toenails evoke when

4. Several disability studies have distinguished between "impairment" as a bodily condition and "disability" as the social and environmental consequences of impairment that impinge on the individual's functioning. See discussions of this issue in Clare's *Exile and Pride*, Garland-Thomson's *Extraordinary Bodies* and Mitchell and Snyder's *Narrative Prosthesis*.

a ‘normal’ woman has them and what they evoke when she sees her daughter with painted toenails.

This scene suggests the ways that disabled individuals receive and (often) internalize messages about their bodies and how their bodies should and shouldn’t participate in the world. Despite her mother’s suggestion that nail varnish is inappropriate for the narrator, the narrator resists cataloging herself as an eternally asexual child; in requesting a pedicure she affirms her right to manipulate her appearance. While the narrator’s embrace of the trappings of femininity may not be unproblematic—both feminist and disability studies scholars have commented on the potentially oppressive aspects of the performance of femininity—the narrator’s request and her mother’s reaction foreground the importance of the signifiers of femininity and sexuality to the narrator’s development as a woman and an artist.⁵

Told retrospectively, the moments that the narrator reflects on are each pivotal in that they reflect the selection, rejection, and, at times, revision of traditional forms of femininity as the narrator attempts to make a place for herself among the representations of femininity that she has inherited. The first archetype of female beauty alluded to is that of the self-sacrificing princess in Hans Christian Anderson’s “The Little Mermaid,” a story the narrator presumably identifies with because, like the mermaid, she does not have conventionally defined legs. In “The Little Mermaid,” the titular mermaid relinquishes her tail and her voice for legs—and an opportunity at romance with a human prince. Although the prince admires the mermaid in her human form and is particularly impressed by her dancing, he nevertheless marries someone else, dooming the mermaid to death.

In “Solo in the Spotlight,” the narrator revises “The Little Mermaid,” a fairy tale notable, of course, for its sexism.⁶ The narrator recalls watching her mother dance with John: “[it] made me wish I could give up my tongue for a set of legs, like the mermaid in the fairy tale. Though that one doesn’t get the prince at the end. I did, I got mine, legs or no” (57). The narrator rejects the fairy tale’s romanticization of sacrifice. Here, the narrator would sacrifice her voice for legs for her own pleasure, rather than for someone else’s pleasure: she does not want legs in order to fulfill a romance plot, but so that she can enjoy dancing. Further,

5. That Jablonski emphasizes the role of social matrices in identity formation suggests an engagement with postmodern theory and, in particular, with Judith Butler’s notion of the gender identity as constructed through “the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names” (2). See Ellen Samuels’ “Critical Divides,” for a rigorous discussion of the potential utility of Judith Butler’s ideas for disability theorists.

6. See Easterlin’s “Hans Christian Andersen’s Fish out of Water” and Cashdan’s *The Witch Must Die*.

as the fairy tale suggests, sacrifice does not guarantee a reward; the narrator points out that “that one doesn’t get the prince in the end.”

The narrator, however, does have a successful romantic life, “legs or no,” and her emphasis that she does “get the prince” suggests her rejection of both the little mermaid ideal of the female whose love does not need reciprocation as well as the myth of the asexual disabled female.⁷ Thus, the narrator not only has a romantic life, but her husband, Joe, is a “prince.” The narrator’s celebration of Joe is particularly important when considered in light of the enduring stereotype that disabled women, in particular, are incapable of initiating or maintaining mutually fulfilling romantic relationships. The narrator’s husband encourages and facilitates her independence and creativity. She explains: “He put a motor on my chair, rigged it so I can drive with my teeth. My *chairiot*” (59). Thus, her relationship with Joe allows for care and nurture, as well as the cultivation of the narrator’s independence. In addition, the narrator’s “chairiot” converts a symbol of dis-ability and confinement to a symbol of royalty and privilege. Together, the narrator and Joe revise conventional scripts which insist on the dependency of the disabled individual. With Joe’s assistance, the narrator manipulates her environment so that it better accommodates her needs and desires.

Thus, the narrator rejects the romantic suffering at the heart of “The Little Mermaid”; although she perceives an overlap between the narratives, Andersen’s story is not her story, nor does it facilitate a better understanding of her life. One problem with the myth of the mermaid is that mermaids are traditionally depicted as beautiful, seductive, or otherwise physically ideal. The narrator’s description of her disillusionment with the idea of the mermaid is thus another pivotal moment in the narrative. Visiting the ocean boardwalk, she and John see a sign that reads: “SEE THE REAL MERMAID” (57). The narrator explains that she “was excited and breathing hard,” but is disappointed to discover that the mermaid “is only a manatee” (57). The narrator turns her disillusionment inward: “I was crushed. I thought, I am the real mermaid. A fat, brown, beady-eye sea cow, that’s me” (57). Perhaps the narrator recognizes that she has more in common with a short-limbed creature that is “fat” and “brown” than one that is (traditionally) white, fair-haired, thin, and conventionally beautiful, but further, in this moment, the narrator is confronted with the myths we use to explain that which is unfamiliar. To a sailor, a manatee might look like a mermaid; the existence of the display suggests that tourists on the boardwalk (including the narrator) also want to believe in mythic creatures. Ironically, the

7. For further discussion, see Kent’s “Disabled Women: Portraits in Fiction and Drama,” Shakespeare, Gillespie-Sells, and Davies’ *The Sexual Politics of Disability*, and Morris’s *Pride against Prejudice*.

sign advertising the display is accurate. The “real mermaid” is always the manatee. But in announcing, “I am the real mermaid,” the narrator evacuates the socially valorized characteristics of the mermaid, instead identifying with the manatee, a creature that disappoints audiences because of its supposed ugliness and banality (at least when compared to a mythical mermaid).

Despite her ironic tone, the narrator’s association of herself with the ostensibly unpleasant creature of reality, rather than the beautiful creature of myth, is a self-degradation. However, the narrator transforms her reaction to the “real” mermaid into art; John acts as a catalyst for her artistic expression when he carves her a wooden manatee, an act that, she explains, is not meant to be “unkind” (57). The narrator describes her method: “I gnaw off the faces and limbs. Joe, my husband, says what I do is art, so I became an artist” (58). The act of chewing has multiple implications. First, the narrator’s methodology in part results from her particular impairment; she uses her mouth to shape the sculptures. Second, sustained consideration is often metaphorized as chewing; the implication is that the narrator processes, mentally and physically, John’s figurative art in order to produce an abstract art that more accurately reflects her vision. The gnawing of arms and legs has the consequence of recreating representational figures, suggesting that, confronted with representations that she perceives as inaccurate or ‘unkind’ and injurious, the narrator revises them to further approximate her experience of the world. The narrator’s artistic mode thus functions as a metaphor for the narrator’s creations as well as Jablonski’s work: both recycle, reshape, and incorporate existing works in order to create something completely new.

In addition, the story’s ending proposes an alternative to the mainstream equation of success with celebrity so popular in twenty-first-century America, as the narrator takes pride in public performance and in her moderate renown. The story concludes with the narrator’s description of “now”: “I get around on my own now, I do my sculptures, and I play music. With my tongue, of course. On the Boardwalk come summertime, me with my red glitter electric keyboard, I’m practically famous” (59). While John the Gambler is instrumental to her early adventures and Joe her husband creates her “chairiot,” the narrator is ultimately autonomous in her choice to perform and create. The narrator’s status as “practically famous” may be read as an acknowledgement of limitations; the narrator does not pretend to a celebrity status she does not have. However, she achieves a measure of success within a specific community.

The story is thus a description of the narrator’s process of filtering various images and notions of femininity and disability; even the site of the protagonist’s performance—the boardwalk—is significant given the sideshow’s long

association with the seashore and boardwalk midway.⁸ The narrator's autonomy and confidence constitutes another act of reclamation of that which was previously associated with oppression. Thus, while the rituals of female beauty and the messages of fairy tales may be associated with promoting female docility and dependence, as well as an unattainable physical conformity, the narrator denies the inherent oppressiveness of these practices and artifacts. Rather, the narrator picks out those elements that she finds useful in the articulation of her identity.

Public performance also emerges as an authorizing activity in Jablonski's story "One of Us." While "Solo in the Spotlight" alludes to literary and cultural artifacts in its description of the narrator's arrival at her identity as a woman and a performer, "One of Us" directly references the archive of literature about disabled individuals who displayed their bodies for money. The story traces the narrator, Hassan's, discovery of the corpus of literature relating to sideshow performers; he is assisted by an otherwise unfriendly librarian who recognizes the validity of his interest in "very special people." In describing the recovery and curatorship of a tradition, Jablonski's story valorizes connections with others as instrumental in developing an understanding of the self.

Hassan is a former conjoined twin whose family immigrated to America from Africa in order for a separation surgery to be performed. In an interview with Tara McCarthy Altebrando—herself the author of a novel about conjoined twins⁹—Jablonski writes that "[Hassan's] identity, his sense of place in the world, is determined by his body above all else." Jablonski's project is thus an exploration of how an individual negotiates his multiple identities; for Hassan, his body impacts his geographic location, his relationship to his brother, and his relationship to his community. While his ethnic background is also unusual within his new community, it is simply less unusual than his physical background. In part, Jablonski's location of identity in the body seems to propose an essentialism; however, Jablonski's emphasis on relationships suggests that identity is inextricable from community.

Indeed, it is perhaps impossible to discuss conjoinment and separation without addressing the importance of relationships. The condition of conjoinment has been of enduring interest to mass audiences perhaps because, as Allison Pingree points out, conjoinment ostensibly challenges naturalized understandings of self and other (174). Conjoined twins were famously showcased for profit in the earlier part of the twentieth century; currently, conjoinment continues

8. See Gary Cross's "Crowds and Leisure" for a discussion of the seashore amusements in the United States and England.

9. Altebrando's novel, *Love Will Tear Us Apart*, describes the careers of conjoined pop stars.

to fascinate mass audiences as the dramas of conjoined births and medical separations appear with some regularity on the nightly news. Recently, depictions of conjoined twins have appeared centrally in both comic and dramatic films, television programs, and a best-selling non-fiction study.¹⁰ But Jablonski's characters have bodies that are relatively new in human experience; their story is part of the larger story of what happens *after* the supposedly miraculous 'normalizing' surgeries that garner media coverage. Although Jablonski does not depict the separation as injurious or mistaken, neither does she uncritically celebrate medical intervention (as do most mass media accounts).¹¹ In "One of Us," Jablonski presents a character ambivalent about the life- and body-altering separation procedure; part of Hassan's journey is the discovery of what it means to him to inhabit a seemingly contradictory category as a separated-conjoined twin.

By describing Hassan and Hussein after their separation, Jablonski underscores the role of bodily history in understanding identity. Thus, Hassan observes that without his brother, he would "just be some kid with one leg" (Jablonski 103). Hassan's claim attends to both distinctions within the category of disability, as well the notion that it is only in relationship to others that our bodies have significance. In this way, "One of Us" probes the experiences of loss: the story describes Hassan's loss of his status as "special," his loss of his brother (as part of himself), his loss of a community as a result of the family's emigration, and a second loss of his brother as Hussein becomes someone unfamiliar to Hassan. It also tells a story of recovery, however: the recovery of an alternative tradition (in the library), the recovery of a different relationship with his brother (as Hassan and Hussein reconcile), and the recovery of community (the story ends with a communal celebration called "Dairy Days" that features a mariachi band and local students singing "Don't Fence Me In"). Indeed, the story's ending presents an ideal community in which the lesbian librarian holds hands with her girlfriend without fear, the formerly-conjoined twins can participate in town and school activities without comment, and the immigrant family is accepted without being completely assimilated. The ending thus presents a vision of successful community: a community which recognizes commonality but also allows for individual difference, a community that permits a "one" among "us."

10. Recent films include the comedy *Stuck on You* (2003), the "mockumentary" *Brothers of the Head* (2006), and the drama *Twin Falls Idaho* (1999). See also HBO's *Carnival*. The surgeons on ABC's *Grey's Anatomy* performed an offensively simple separation surgery in an episode titled "Don't Stand So Close to Me." Altebrando's novel and Dreger's non-fiction study are two recent publications that focus on conjoined twins. Finally, stories about conjoined twins have appeared on *ABC News Primetime* (14 December, 2000), *Nightline* (11 July, 2003), and *The Oprah Winfrey Show* (4 February, 2004).

11. See Dreger's *One of Us*.

The navigations necessary for the achievement of this vision are reflected in the recurring image of the fence, an instrument that can function literally and metaphorically to include or to exclude. Clearly, communities themselves are predicated on the existence of boundaries, but the fence is also a fraught image because exclusion and sequestration have traditionally served as two of mainstream America's primary strategies for dealing with individuals with nonconforming physicalities. Further, the notion of the fence may also conjure the image of confining apparatus or disabling attitudes which assume an individual's limited potential. Thus, the lyrics, "Don't fence me in" (105) express a peculiarly American desire for liberty, but also articulate a metaphorical desire to resist classification.

Jablonski relates Hassan's recognition of the utility and the danger of the fence to his understanding of his own body as remarkable. Hassan describes an activity at school:

I dip my brush in black. I paint two stick figures, side by side, one leg each...I've done nothing to show perspective, so I paint a large fence in the foreground. At the top of the page I write TWINS. The paint is too wet, we bleed together. The fence looks like a cage. (94)

Hassan must "show perspective" in order to fulfill the assignment; although his task is to demonstrate the ability to manipulate symbols in order to convey meaning, Hassan's painting conveys a different meaning than the one he intended. Like animals in a zoo—or certain performers in a sideshow—Hassan and Hussein are symbolically removed from others and thus subject to interpretation. Even the word "TWINS," indicating Hassan and Hussein's primary identity, echoes the traditional sideshow billboard advertising an attraction.

But Hassan deploys the fence for his own purposes; ostensibly, the fence serves to demonstrate an understanding of relationships. By including the fence, Hassan shows that he and his brother share a unique and separate "perspective." However, although differentiated, the figures "bleed together." In this way, Hassan's painting also begins to suggest the complex interdependency of conjoinment—an interdependency which became dysfunctional for Hassan and Hussein. Hassan explains: "When we were born, I was the strong one ... We shared veins, blood; no matter how much I fattened up, if he died, so would I. Separation was the only choice" (95). Although necessary, separation remains a radical disruption of the relationship between the brothers and, as 'conjoined twins' is also an identity category, of the relationship to the self.

But while conjoinment is problematic, the image in Hassan's painting suggests that Hassan and Hussein's status as single is untenable as well: the figures "bleed together." In addition, Hassan articulates anxiety over the separation, remark-

ing: “Sometimes I dream that Chang and Eng come and stick us together again. *We weren’t separated*, says Chang, *so why should you be?* says Eng. Chang and Eng are the bosses of all Siamese twins. Actually, they were born in China” (85). Hassan’s esteem for Chang and Eng, while articulated in the grammar school vernacular (they are “bosses of” others), reveals his understanding of a genealogy and a larger tradition. Additionally, recognizing his physical affinity with Chang and Eng Bunker, Hassan also assumes a custodial role with regard to the “bosses” of all twins. Explaining that they were “[a]ctually” Chinese serves to foreground Hassan’s sense of ownership or expertise; he can correct the misconception because he has an investment in the tradition.

Hassan’s understanding of that tradition—and of his place within that tradition—is developed with the help of a librarian; acting as an arbiter of inclusion/exclusion, the librarian initially attempts to withhold materials about “special” individuals from Hassan. As a result of the post-sideshow era’s medicalization of physical difference, which rendered taboo photographs and images of individuals with non-conforming bodies, the librarian tries to prevent Hassan from viewing Frederick Drimmer’s collection of biographies and images, *Very Special People* (1973). Hassan recalls: “The librarian had said: ‘*You can’t check this out, you need permission from your parents.*’ I said, *I am one. One what?* she said. *A very special person*” (99).

The librarian’s reluctance to share the materials with Hassan suggests that the archive is itself dis-abled—its power diffused—when it is rendered inaccessible. Additionally, while the librarian’s reticence evidences a latent understanding that the images in a book like *Very Special People* may be used to oppress, she also recognizes that they are not themselves inherently exploitative. One’s perspective is paramount; Hassan’s status as “one” informs his approach and understanding of the book’s content. He is not viewing these “special people” with the intention of being horrified or titillated. Rather, Drimmer’s text provides Hassan with the opportunity to see others like himself—or as he formerly was. Hassan explains how he feels after the librarian provides him with a copy of Tod Browning’s controversial film *Freaks* (1932), which features well-known sideshow performers including Daisy and Violet Hilton: “Watching this movie, *Freaks*, I get a sort of homesick feeling for the circus life” (100). Hassan’s description of his response is vague and disarticulate (“a sort of homesick feeling”) because he lacks the vocabulary to discuss these individuals with whom he feels a kinship, but with whom he has no familial, racial, ethnic, or even generational connection.

Hassan is particularly taken with the Hiltons: “It’s one thing to see them in photographs, or read their obituary on microfiche, but actually hearing them talk and seeing them *alive* is something else. The sideways way they move, dancing

back to back, they're some creature out of myth" (100). Hassan's statement is ironically accurate. Although Daisy and Violet are women of the twentieth century—not some “creature out of myth”—people like the Hilton sisters may be facing obsolescence. As a result of separation surgeries and the pathologization of corporeal variety, conjoined twins like the Hilton sisters are, in fact, fading into the realm of myth.¹² On one level, however, Hassan's recovery of this film ensures that the Hilton sisters, for example, do not disappear from historical record. Hassan and the librarian thus assume the role of curators of the archive. Hassan shares the “stories” of other conjoined twins with his brother, thus contributing to the circulation of their narratives (99).

What Hassan learns is that he is part of multiple communities; he situates himself as a “special” person, but he also identifies as a part of his family and of his local community. The last words of the story are Hassan and Hussein's mother's praise after they participate in the chorus singing “Don't Fence Me In”; she says, “Good brothers” (105). The twins' success, like the success of the narrator of “Solo in the Spotlight,” has been to perform on their own terms. While Hassan and Hussein recognize themselves as exceptional, they are also part of the community. In addition, their relationship with each other, which allows for each brother's individuality, further underscores the possibilities of embracing individuality as well as commonality.

Overall, “One of Us” is focused on the relationship between the self and the community; in the treatment of her subject matter, Jablonski begins to enact the community-building that the story celebrates. Announcing the connection between the individual (“one”) and the group (“us”), the title, “One of Us,” immediately establishes an ambiguous collective. In addition, the title has another, more specific meaning: it alludes to the film *Freaks* and, specifically, to a scene in which the parameters of the sideshow community are established and tested.¹³ Jablonski's allusion to *Freaks* indicates the existence of an ‘inside’ group that is aware of the stories and symbols of a larger tradition, as well as a reclamation of the valuable parts of that tradition. Thus, for the reader who is unfamiliar with Browning's film, the title may appear inclusive when it actually functions as exclusive. Those ‘in the know’ know what the title refers to and recognize themselves as part of a select group. However, the film itself, like the histories of Chang and Eng Bunker and Daisy and Violet Hilton and the content of Drimmer's *Very Special People*, is described in the story and this inclusion may

12. See Dreger's *One of Us* for a discussion of the moral, ethical, and political concerns surrounding separation surgery.

13. The phrase “one of us” is also referenced in Katharine Dunn's *Geek Love*, in the premier episode of the HBO drama *Carnival*, and in the title of Dreger's study, *One of Us*.

serve to bring those who are unfamiliar with the tradition into the fold. Jablonski's story thus enacts its theme by inviting the reader into a community and providing her with the tools and language to better understand and engage that community. Through references in the title and text, Jablonski acknowledges the tradition of disability representation as she expands it.

Like the story title "One of Us," the title of the collection, *Human Oddities*, suggests both that which is unique and that which is plural, as well as references to a larger tradition. The human oddity is the rare and singular specimen; the term "oddities" conjures the notion of the sideshow, museum, or 'cabinet of curiosity.' The title, however, also emphasizes the humanity of the subjects or oddities. Jablonski's collection is not solely concerned with physical "oddities," but with a range of individuals who find themselves somehow at odds with the mainstream culture. In the collection's first story, "Pam Calls Her Mother on Five-Cent Sundays," for example, oddities abound: the protagonist is an eccentric and depressed divorcee and supporting characters include conjoined twins loosely based on the Hilton sisters. While it is perhaps problematic to collapse physical and emotional eccentricities, Jablonski's overarching investigation is of commonality between the ostensibly dissimilar. The idea that the physically eccentric individual and the individual who feels him or herself as a social misfit may have an affiliation is not a new one; as David Hevey points out, disability has often been deployed as a metaphor for general alienation. However, Jablonski's work suggests an effective alliance which also permits the materiality of the body. In these stories, the recognition of shared oppression and of shared delight in human variability can facilitate the construction of community.

In "Solo in the Spotlight" and "One of Us," Jablonski grapples with the contingencies of the body and the prejudices of a norm-obsessed society while resisting the reduction of characters to their impairments. Crucially, Jablonski's characters do not exist in a vacuum; they respond to their surroundings as well as to the archive of disability representation and, as a result, contribute to that archive. In order to pull together some of the multiple strands of ideas I have identified operating in Jablonski's stories as well as in recent disability criticism and literature, I will conclude with a brief discussion of another narrative of disability, Anne Finger's short story "Helen and Frida," which also draws on and challenges the archive of disability representation. The story's premise is the imagined meeting of the two titular "female icons of disability": Helen Keller and Frida Kahlo (Finger 403).¹⁴ The nine-year-old narrator describes the

14. In a similar vein, Georgina Kleege's "Helen Keller's Love Life" imaginatively reconstructs the events surrounding Keller's engagement to Peter Fagan.

meeting of Helen and Frida as a movie she is directing: “This isn’t going to be one of those movies where they put their words into our mouths ... in this movie the blind women have milky eyes that make the sighted uncomfortable” (402–403). The narrator/director’s no-nonsense announcement challenges the romanticized Hollywood versions of disability that put “words into” the mouths of disabled individuals, rendering them non-threatening and grateful for attention and assistance.¹⁵ Instead, Finger’s director insists on representational integrity—even if it results in the audience’s discomfort. Further, the narrator’s deployment of the term “our” conjures a community of disability-activists and can perhaps serve to mobilize all of those—disabled and able-bodied alike—who recognize the injuriousness of Hollywood depictions.

Finger’s piece concludes, however, with the narrator’s declaration: “I can’t yet imagine a world where these two might meet” (407). According to the narrator, we are still incapable of allowing our imaginations to accommodate these types of fantasies. Further, it is the “world” that stunts the development of ‘realistic’ representations of disabled figures; although she resists elaborating on why mainstream audiences might reject realistic depictions of disability, the narrator makes clear that existing representations are romanticized to suggest disability is an accessory or that disability is an obstacle to be overcome. Neither scenario challenges the existing social structures or behaviors that refuse to accommodate difference.

However, Finger’s narrator’s pessimism also reminds us that isolation is an effective tool of oppression. We live in a world, she suggests, where powerful disabled women are kept separate both in their lives, their histories, and our imaginations. Disability studies scholars have bemoaned representations of disability as a condition that is appropriately handled alone, in private, and without complaint, identifying this condition as not only an insidious stereotype, but as a counterforce to empowerment through connection.¹⁶ One strategy for resisting this isolation, Finger’s work suggests, is to draw attention to the limits of our culture’s understanding of disability in order to insist on a disability-perspective in recovery and representation. In this manner, authors such as Clare, Lewis and Baizley, Finger, and Jablonski, take up the call to present stories about disability that situate characters in communities and traditions. By depicting a larger tradition in which both the characters and the narratives participate, these authors not only refuse isolation, but begin to suggest the complex web of relationships that impact on disability and disability representation. The task

15. Martin Norden observes that Hollywood’s handling of disability is unsurprising (1).

16. See Paul K. Longmore’s “Screening Stereotypes” and Chapter 1 of Mitchell and Snyder’s *Narrative Prosthesis*.

before artists and scholars now resides not only in further identification of artifacts in the representational tradition, but in the tradition's maintenance, interrogation, and continuation.

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