Given the taxonomical purposes to which her unusual body was deployed in Victorian culture, it is appropriate that I first “met” Julia Pastrana in a box. In the summer of 1996, I was in Oxford doing research at the John Johnson Collection of Printed Ephemera, a glorious resource for research on British popular culture, which holds the disposable artifacts of everyday life. Street ballads, broadsides, playbills, valentines, beauty books, illustrations, and newspaper clippings are all carefully indexed in boxes that open like giant storybooks. Pastrana’s story—or at least the version of it I first encountered—resides in a box labeled “Human Freaks 2.” Powerful, compelling, and disturbing, both the woman's image and the stories that accompany it are startling, even within the lexicon of “Human Freaks.”

In “Human Freaks 2,” among handbills promoting mermaids and mermen, the Aztec Lilliputians (actually mentally retarded microencephalic children) and the small-footed Chinese lady, are the two clippings that generated this essay.1 The first is a handbill trumpeting the London appearance of Julia Pastrana, the Nondescript, otherwise known as the Bear Woman, appearing at the Regent Gallery in 1857. The second is an etching from an 1862 issue of the Penny Illustrated Journal, promoting with equal vivacity a “New and Unparalleled Discovery in
the Art of Embalming . . . As Exemplified in the Appearance of Julia Pastrana," available for viewing later at the Burlington Gallery, 191 Piccadilly. When I first came upon these bits of paper, I was intrigued by the illustration of a dark, bearded woman holding a flower in the first advertisement, and then horrified but fascinated by the second depiction of the same woman, dead, embalmed, and propped upright sans flower in a glass cage.

Not surprisingly, the range of sources about Pastrana deliver variously credible accounts of the story behind these documents, yet most all agree that Pastrana was born to an indigenous tribe in Mexico during Victoria’s early years on the throne. She suffered from two rare congenital disorders, due to which her face and body were covered in long dark hair and her gums were so overgrown as to appear to be a second set of teeth. Abandoned as a child, she was taken in by the governor of Sinaloa, in whose house she was working as a serving girl when an American promoter discovered her in the 1850s and convinced her to join the ranks of physical “freaks” who were increasingly being exhibited for money in the United States. Pastrana was a very good performer—so good, in fact, as to attract both large audiences and considerable competition for her commerce. Her second manager, Theodore Lent, persuaded her to marry him in 1858 as a means, according to various sources, of ensuring that her profits would continue to come to him. After extended international touring, Pastrana became pregnant by Lent and, in 1860, was delivered of a son who shared her congenital traits. The boy lived only hours, Pastrana herself only a few days after him. According to the sparse primary information left by her few acquaintances, she spoke three languages, sang beautifully, and was an intelligent, kindly woman, normal in all aspects but that of appearance.

Until her death, Pastrana maintained an active career as the Bear Woman, the Baboon Lady, and the Ugliest Woman in the World, among other monikers. However, in one of those plot twists that prove truth stranger than fiction, her career continued, and continues beyond her death. Lent, her clever capitalist husband, sold the corpses of his wife and child to a pioneer in the science of embalming, one Professor Sokolov, who treated the bodies and placed them in Moscow Imperial University’s anatomical museum. When Lent realized that he might still exhibit his wife—and profitably add his child to the mix—he fought to buy back their bodies. His success opened the second phase of Pastrana’s career, during which she and her son were exhibited as embalmed
corpses. This career continued into the 1970s when she toured in the United States with the traveling Million Dollar Midways. Her body now resides in the basement of the Institute of Forensic Medicine in Oslo and is ostensibly available only for medical research. As a coda to the story, Theodore Lent married a second bearded woman, Marie Bartels, whom he persuaded to be exhibited as Julia’s sister, “Zenora Pastrana,” initially alongside the corpse of his former wife. He lived and worked with her for more than a decade. His death followed a mental collapse, during which he reportedly ran naked through the streets of St. Petersburg, tearing up banknotes and throwing them into the Neva River. Not surprisingly, current renderings of Pastrana find decided satisfaction in her husband’s melodramatic end.

In nineteenth-century England, alongside Darwinian discourse, early anthropology, “civilizing” missions, and efforts to create more equitable forms of citizenship for both women and nonwhites, Pastrana’s spectacular body was generally deployed to pose decidedly Victorian questions of classification. More recently, various artists have taken Pastrana out of her original context and repackaged her surprising image for modern audiences with modern concerns. The disturbing story of an intelligent woman in a disruptive body—married, sold, stuffed, and circulated—and the image of that body have together attracted the attention of scholars so diverse as Richard Altick, Coco Fusco, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, and Matthew Sweet, as well as that of various poets, musicians, dramatists, and screenwriters. Beyond her remarkable success as a live performer in her own era, and as a lifeless exhibit for more than a century following her death, her appeal has proved enduring for current audiences: just in the past decade, representations of Pastrana have multiplied in both number and complexity. Her body signified powerfully for the Victorian audiences that viewed her initially, and it continues to signify powerfully now.

In this essay I want to emphasize the mobile effects of spectacle, the ways in which socially discordant bodies resonate with cultural meanings, and how the same body may mean quite different things even at the same cultural moment. I will focus primarily on Pastrana’s significance with regard to the Victorian culture in which she lived and died, but I also want to stress the boundaries of that reading and question whether current theoretical perspectives adequately describe the mechanics of freakery. In so doing, I will be utilizing various of the most common strategies for analyzing “freak” culture, which by and large deploy discourses of Othering, by now a familiar critical dynamic.
wherein exhibited bodies become legible only through a rhetoric of negation that articulates the subject’s differences from the body on display. “Normalcy” thus emerges through a series of “nots,” the most famous of which is the viewing subject’s “not me.” This implicit rejection of “abnormal” bodies is roughly accurate in discussing the general attitude in Victorian culture wherein exhibitions emerged as a form of entertainment alongside a fascination with compartmentalizing the world into infinitely smaller boxes.

I find it rather problematic, however, that beyond the paradigm of Othering, the most benign options that modern theory has to offer spectators both modern and historical are pity and misguided worship. Pity emerges as a positive variation on Othering that elevates the viewing subject through a rhetoric of sentimentality. According to Garland-Thomson, empathy for the body on display “pos[s] an exchange of feeling so that the other inspires elevating and humanizing sensibilities in the self which then projects those sentiments back onto the other. This sentimental economy merges identification through pity with differentiation through otherness to produce Pastrana as the hybrid construct of the sensitive monster, whose role it is to instruct, edify, and thus construct the middle-class canonical self. Her viewers become better people, citizens higher on the ladder of bourgeois respectability, through looking at Pastrana.” Pity, in other words, is inevitably a form of superiority. Despite its gestures of identification, it bestows grace from above, thus maintaining the distance of radical difference. And pity does accurately describe some Victorian responses to Pastrana: many records report the exclamation, “Poor woman!” while one of Lent’s promotional catalogs suggests that the viewer who attends “with the expectations of seeing some frightful monster . . . will be puzzled amazingly to account for his share of the milk of human kindness, and the abundant juiciness of his own heart.” Similarly, various scholars have argued that the reverence of both audiences and critics maintains the freak’s Otherness, simply inverting the position of the spectator (looking up to versus looking down upon). Mary Russo, for example, criticizes the movement that emerged in the 1960s to identify with the freak (to “freak out”) as a means of expressing “the secret self.” Russo’s objection—that such impulses are “nostalgic and idealizing”—is well taken, as is her point that “real freak” communities often overtly reject “regular bodied” members. Denigration, pity, and reverence, that is, all use the body of the Other as an occasion to construct some element of the self, and do so without recognizing the desire, will, or subjectivity of that Other.
However apt this limited range of perspectives may seem for describing exhibition culture, neither renunciation, nor idealization, nor pity adequately describes the tenor of many deployments of Pastrana’s image, which bespeak what I will be terming affiliation. Affiliation is an effort toward alliance, collaboration, and understanding; it recognizes difference but neither fetishizes nor seeks to erase it. It does not escape the problems of projection: especially when one engages with a figure long deceased, a truly reciprocal relationship is impossible. Therefore, affiliation maintains the troublesome risk of co-optation, but it also recognizes its desires and its stakes. It is, that is to say, a form of engagement that attends to and is consciously answerable for its own inevitable liabilities.\textsuperscript{11}

The efforts toward affiliation in many current representations of Pastrana have forced me to return to and reconsider my readings of various Victorian engagements with her. Lent’s remarks above, for example, seem clearly to promote Pastrana as a vehicle of “instruct[ing], edify[ing], and thus construct[ing] the middle-class canonical self.”\textsuperscript{12} However, his metaphors (“the milk of human kindness,” the juicy heart) also suggest the potential for less predictable forms of engagement that have boundaries more permeable than awe, pity, or dismissal allow. In addition, then, to analyzing representations of Pastrana over the years, I will be working through those analyses to both illustrate and augment the scholarly lexicon that describes the relationship between ordinary and extraordinary bodies.\textsuperscript{13}

\textit{Exhibition Perspectives: Spectacle and Dirt}

Two theoretical approaches predominate in modern readings of exceptional bodies; both underscore the exclusionary—or disciplinary—aspects of display. First, Mary Russo’s comments on the relationship between spectacle and gender in \textit{The Female Grotesque} emphasize the cultural processes activated by the female body out of bounds:

There is a phrase that still resonates from childhood. . . . It is a harsh, matronizing phrase, and it is directed toward the behavior of other women: “She [the other woman] is making a spectacle out of herself.”

Making a spectacle out of oneself seemed a specifically feminine danger. The danger was of an exposure. . . . For a woman, making a spectacle out of herself had . . . to do with a kind of inadvertency and loss of
boundaries: the possessors of large, aging, and dimpled thighs displayed at
the public beach, of overly rouged cheeks, of a voice shrill in laughter, or
of a sliding bra strap—a loose, dingy bra strap especially—were at once
cought out by fate and blameworthy.\(^4\)

In this passage, Russo concentrates on the relationship between the pro-
duction of proper gender identity and the disciplinary function of clas-
sifying disorderly women as spectacles through “a kind of inadvertency
and loss of boundaries.” The act of identifying, or taxonomizing, women
explicitly constructs boundaries where they are most needed, where the
potential for likeness overshadows the clarity of difference. The spec-
tacular body thus exposes the appearances and behaviors that bound
ormalcy, the *cordon sanitaire* beyond which propriety must not pass;
the spectacle offers an inverse example of the “normal.” Such bound-
ing seems accurate for a nineteenth-century culture in which merely to
court the gaze, even within the private space of the home, was to play
at the margins of feminine grace. The excessive visibility a woman haz-
arded in acting up or out provided substantial fodder for contemporary
authors—think of Austen’s Maria Bertram, Brontë’s Blanche Ingram,
Eliot’s Gwendolen Harleth—and, subsequently, has fueled a profusion
of feminist and cultural studies scholarship.

A woman who put herself on display *beyond* the private space of the
home was even more troublesome: until late in the century, professional
acting was commonly denigrated.\(^5\) As the Victorian moralist Dinah
Mulock Craik argued, the actress was perilously close to the prostitute:
“the general eye becomes familiar, not merely with her genius, but her
corporeality.”\(^6\) Elsewhere, Craik observes that a woman who seeks the
spotlight “is a creature so anomalous that she cannot fail to do enor-
mous harm, both to her own sex and to the other. She ceases to be the
 guardian angel she was meant to be, and becomes an angel-faced devil,
working woe wherever she appears.”\(^7\) Craik’s alarm may be amusing,
but her strategy of species segregation is part of a larger dynamic that
models the Victorian subject’s proper relationship to bodies on display.
When Craik divides women into two classes, angels and devils, she
expects her readers to understand which one is in the house and which
is categorically excluded. The angel-faced devil defines by negation the
very *species* of proper womanhood. Deploiring the woman who seeks the
spotlight, Craik relies upon a Victorian lexicon that condemns social
behavior through racialization, so that the “angel-faced devil” becomes
a dangerous hybrid.
As a form of boundary blurring, hybridity was of widespread interest in an era obsessed with taxonomy. Pastrana offered a walking metaphor for disorder: standing at the crossroads of male and female, animal and human, savage and civilized, Pastrana’s body refused to keep this separate from that. As Garland-Thomson has argued, “Her body was explicated as a boundary violation, a confusion of categories, a puzzle-ment.” Pastrana epitomized the hybrid’s potential to muddy the waters of classification.

In analyzing such border cases, many scholars have turned to Mary Douglas’s notion of dirt as “matter out of place” to explain Victorian formulations of racial, national, and class difference, categories that exhibition culture both complicated and clarified. According to Douglas, “Dirt . . . is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt there is system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements.” In regarding Victorian exhibitions, dirt provides a remarkably useful metaphor for understanding the tenuous line between savagery and civilization, and for contextualizing the implications of social dirt for these categories of identity. In Pastrana’s case, her social transgressions as the female body on display were mapped onto her body in what seemed to be a form of species deviance.

In general, the Victorians linked concepts of difference with ideologies of race and empire, many of which were deployed in the interest of keeping individual bodies in line. The vast number of late-Victorian soap advertisements that promoted the idea that racial color is dirt worked both to shore up the sanctity of white British identity and to inculcate the various forms of supervision inherent in it. The ads thus drew upon notions of dirt, species, and nation to suggest that racial color exceeds the specificity of raced bodies. For example, in one increasingly infamous Pears’ advertisement, a black boy peers almost fearfully into a tub of seemingly opaque water as a white boy, sporting a crisp white apron, hands him a bar of Pears’ soap (figure 9.1). In the diptych’s second plate, the bather reappears, washed white from his neck down, peeking at his reflection in a mirror held by his aproned attendant. No longer suspicious but wide-eyed with wonder, the black boy regards his transformed body, his leg displacing the tub’s slogan now that his body stands as testimony to it: Pears’ soap, matchless for the complexion, has expanded the parameters of possibility, turning on its ear that old fabular maxim about the impossibility of washing an Ethiop white.
The ad’s ideology seems fairly straightforward, as it suggests in none too subtle terms not only that Pears’ is fabulous soap but also that racial color is equivalent to dirt and that blacks, if only they would “clean themselves up,” might be as white as the next Briton. However, just as Pastrana’s image offers various interpretive possibilities, the ad as it was printed in the 1890s is irreducible to a simplified racial spectrum of black and white. In the strikingly vivid original, both the soap and the
“black” boy are brown, and the cheeks of the white boy’s face, as well as of those that peer in, out, and down from the corners of the ad, are a rosy pink. Just as it is important that the Crayola crayon with which I used to color white faces was once called “flesh” but is now more correctly labeled not “white” but “peach,” the pink cheeks of the “white” faces in this ad only approximate the whiteness Victorian culture held in such high regard. Color proves to be a cultural condition that can, perhaps, be washed off but also, conversely, can “soil” racially white bodies, thereby bringing them into the realm of cultural visibility and censorship. Even in racist soap ads, that is, dirt is less the stuff of bodily content than of proper bodily management.

Another ad, in which a bar of Pears’ soap crests an exotic horizon as “The Dawn of Civilization,” more clearly articulates the link between behavior, racial color, and social purity (figure 9.2). Printed in the 1890s, this ad explicitly refers back to the mid-century practice of exhibiting foreign peoples. These exhibitions aligned racial color with social dirt through the rhetoric of spectacle, catching out foreign or deviant (“uncivilized”) bodies and behaviors and making them “blameworthy.” Echoing the works of Edwin Chadwick and other sanitary reformers who clearly linked “civilization” with “clean” living, the exhibition effectively excluded behavioral others from the civilized world. Few middle- and upper-class visitors attended the free display of “savage” life that Chadwick, Henry Mayhew, and others had discovered at home in the slums of England, but the middle-class public was fascinated with and regularly visited the displays of “real” savages at Vauxhall Gardens, Leicester Square, the Egyptian Room, and other such venues.22

Exhibitions in which peoples of foreign lands were put on display for “Civilized White People,” as one handbill calls them, gained popularity in England throughout the Victorian period.23 Crowds flocked to see the Aztec Children, the Algerine Family, the Small-footed Chinese Lady and Family, the Zulu Kafrs, the Ojibbeway Indians, the Pigmy Earthmen, and Julia Pastrana, the Bear Woman, among others. These exhibitions brought the literally exotic into safe spaces where, for between 1s and 5s, visitors learned not only about the habits of “savages” abroad but also that civilized whiteness required more than having pale skin. By aligning display (the principal of exhibition) with racial color and cultural barbarism, these exhibitions tacitly erected the guidelines that regulated civilization and, hence, inclusion within the category of “white.”24 The exhibition, then, exceeded its function of teaching its audience how wonderful it was to be a British citizen; it also, as Charles Dickens demonstrates in his essay “The Noble
Savage,” effectively employed the threat of racializing the insurgent white body. Underlining the ways in which exhibitions were lessons in proper British behavior, the author writes, “if we have anything to learn from the Noble Savage, it is what to avoid.” Dickens’s “what to avoid” had nothing whatever to do with the color or decoration of one’s body. It entailed characterological traits that antonymically summed up British civilization. A good Briton is not “cruel, false, thievish, murderous,” nor “conceited, tiresome, bloodthirsty, [or] monotinous.” Proving that his concept of savagery has no relation to skin color, Dickens compares the Zulu Kafirs to the Irish:
The chief makes a speech to his brothers and friends, arranged in single file. No particular order is observed during the delivery of this address, but every gentleman who finds himself excited by the subject, instead of crying “Hear, hear!” as is the custom with us, darts from the rank and tramples out the life, or crushes the skull, or mashes the face, or scoops out the eyes, or breaks the limbs, or performs a whirlwind of atrocities on the body, of an imaginary enemy. Several gentlemen becoming thus excited at once, and pounding away without the least regard to the orator, that illustrious person is rather in the position of an orator in an Irish House of Commons. But, several of these scenes of savage life bear a strong generic resemblance to an Irish election, and I think would be extremely well received and understood at Cork.²⁷

Dickens is only one of a plethora of Victorian thinkers who illustrate how the exhibition could be mobilized as a disciplinary medium that taught its audience to Other the bodies on display. Condemning the white Irish alongside the black Zulus for their collective lack of civilization, Dickens illustrates the ease with which the white body might take on the attributes of the savage. If one exceeded the parameters of civilized British behavioral codes, if one acted like a “savage,” these exhibits implicitly suggested, one might well become one. The exhibition, therefore, was a form of public entertainment with the potential to be a powerful ideological tool.

**Pastrana in England**

I want to offer multiple readings of Pastrana’s body as it appeared in Victorian culture. I begin here with the standard disciplinary reading that I have been developing thus far and that, until recently, had been my only reading of her significance for Victorian viewers. Within Victorian rhetorics of dirt and spectacle, exhibitions of Pastrana’s dark-complexioned, hair-covered body crystallized in reverse a prescription for Victorian white womanhood, materializing literally the fabular consequences—ostracism, racial or species segregation, and an unappealing masculinity—with which Victorian culture threatened ostentatious women. Her appearances were part of a much larger operation that, in effect, inculcated the mechanics of social discipline.²⁸

The handbill advertising Julia Pastrana’s 1857 appearance in London’s Regent Gallery, for example, elucidates how Pastrana’s paradoxical
body worked to articulate and to police the borders of femininity (figure 9.3). It describes Pastrana as both animal and young lady, both masculine and feminine, both foreign and utterly domestic. The description of “Miss Julia Pastrana, the NONDESCRIPT” remarks:

This curious and very interesting little lady . . . has thick black hair upon the nose, forehead, and every part of her face and person, excepting the front of the neck, hands, and feet; . . . she has very pretty whiskers, beard, and moustache; her eyes are large and fine . . . ; her form and limbs are quite perfect, with wonderfully small hands and feet. Altogether Miss Julia is the most singular, curious, and pleasing specimen of humanity in the world, and will entertain her audiences by dancing

THE HIGHLAND FLING,
AND SINGING
ENGLISH AND SPANISH ROMANCES.\textsuperscript{29}

The handbill clearly articulates Pastrana’s exhibitions within the discourses of dirt and spectacle, using her body and its display to promote female docility, reticence, and modesty within the field of vision. Encouraging audiences to disregard the more “normal” aspects of Pastrana’s identity, it presents Pastrana as an odd disjunction of feminine ability and hirsute excess, not merely a “human curiosity” but also a parable about the consequences of female display. Through functional solicitation rather than evasion of the gaze, this rendition of Pastrana’s exhibitions suggests, first, Pastrana’s audacity in putting herself on stage, and that departing from social constraint had literal somatic consequences: the “very interesting little lady” who made a spectacle of herself would be rewarded for her troubles with a fall into color and a preponderance of body hair. Advertisements such as this one note that, although she can “Cook, Wash, Iron, [and] Sew,” at her exhibitions Pastrana leaves off domestic employment to dance and sing. The “thick black hair upon the nose, forehead, and every part of her face and person, excepting the front of the neck, hands, and feet” thus seems to narrate her truancy from kitchen and hearth—one handbill even remarks explicitly, “In 1854, Julia getting tired of housework [in Mexico], left for the United States to be exhibited.”\textsuperscript{30}

Furthermore, various printed materials promoting the 1857 show at the Regent describe Pastrana as a “Digger Indian.” According to one London pamphlet, “Travellers say that of all the Aborigines known within limits of the Western Continent, the Digger Indians are certainly
Figure 9.3
the most filthy and abominable. They come into the world and go from it with as little purpose as other Carnivorous animals.”

Although the same pamphlet marks her difference from her tribe—“the case is quite the reverse with Julia Pastrana”—its rhetoric of civilization and filth ally both her body and her performance with animalistic, uncivilized behavior. The fact that the category of “Digger Indian” is an invention of nineteenth-century writers lays bare the desire to classify the performing, masculine, nondocile female body as barbaric and animalistic. Arthur Munby’s long poem “Pastrana” takes a similar tack, going so far as to disallow the term “woman” to describe not only Pastrana but also women who offer themselves up for visual consumption in general. The poem begins with Munby’s speaker at the zoo, regarding “a big black ape from over the sea,” who “sputter’d and grinn’d in a fearsome way.”

Fascinated and disgusted by the grinning female baboon, the speaker returns to his inn, only to be terrified when he recognizes the “baboon lady” amongst a large dinner party of “gentles and simples, ladies fair, / And some not fair though fine” (9). Of one of the gowned, bejeweled women amongst the party of fifty at his inn, the speaker muses:

Sure, I remember those bright brown eyes?  
And the self-same look that in them lies  
I have seen already, with strange surprise,  
This very afternoon;  
Not in the face of a woman like this,  
Who has human features, and lips to kiss.  
But in one who can only splutter and hiss—  
In the eyes of a grim baboon! (10)

Munby’s fantastical tale articulates the symbolic propensity for women to slide into barbarity, as the ape on display at the zoo materializes in the “fine” woman at the “sumptuous inn.” Much of the poem’s panic derives from the speaker’s fear that first the baboon and then the woman will break free of her restraints (a literal chain in the case of the former, a symbolic collar in the latter) and “get at” him (6, 8). And yet, in an oddly sensitive symmetry, he realizes that he has “gotten to” the baboon, provoking her ire by staring. “Why do you stare at me so?” he imagines her asking (5), and concludes that

She did not like my scrutiny;  
And she meant to know the reason why
A human mortal such as I
Should trouble her state at all. (8)

In one of the poem’s more telling moments, the speaker articulates explicit anxiety about women who look back. His discomfort emerges from her returned stare, from the “singular look in her bright brown eye . . . [which] meant too much and it reach’d too high / For one of an apelike kind” (6). When he finds this “singular look” repeated in “the self-same look” of his dinner companion, he immediately begins to suspect her qualification to socialize with polite company. Both the baboon and the gazing woman disturb the speaker’s confident viewing position and hence unsettle his comfortable manhood.

The polemic of the returned gaze that Munby presents may explain, at least in part, the appeal of Pastrana’s postmortem performance as “The Embalmed Nondescript, Exhibiting at 191 Piccadilly.” Her capacity for response suspended, her body rendered passive, mute, and visually inert, Pastrana’s embalmed corpse has had a long and illustrious career that, as I note above, continues to this day. As Janet Browne and Sharon Messenger observe, “Her literal transformation into a pickled object made it easier for curious spectators to gaze without embarrassment.” The 1862 exhibition carried forward the mid-Victorian discourses of race and gender that implicated white women through the bodies of women of color, but it neutralized Pastrana’s capacity to look or talk back.

In her Burlington Gallery exhibitions, Pastrana’s tightly corseted, short-petticoated corpse stood upright in a glass cage, her brown body explicitly cast as a performer. While the head that topped that body maintained her radical difference from the English showgirl, it also revealed an usually unseen “truth” about the showgirl’s body: Pastrana was unbonneted, her hair in disarray, her features set in an angry, rebellious stare, and her beard and moustache prominent. The sensationalized display of Pastrana’s embalmed corpse exposed the showgirl as a deformed creature who brought her body into the public sphere for money, who all too self-consciously performed the attributes of femininity.

In an etching from the *Penny Illustrated Journal* (figure 9.4), Pastrana appears as the shade within Victorian white womanhood in general. Behind the glass case in which Pastrana stands is a white couple, a top-hatted man and a bonneted woman. While the man stands three-quarters to the outside of the case so that most of his body and nearly
all of his head are clearly visible, the woman stands fully behind the double layer of glass that encloses the outlandishly outfitted, bearded corpse. The glass is a complexly fluid barrier that not only obscures the white woman’s face and body but also, because she stands behind and only slightly off-center to Pastrana, casts her as Pastrana’s shadow.
This strange inversion—white middle-class lady as shadow of brown hermaphroditic showgirl—maintains and complicates the relationship between the two women: here are not simply a viewing subject and a viewed object, for the shadow-woman is not clearly white, although her dress and white husband imply that she is so. Behind the protective glass that boxes Pastrana, the woman appears a dusky gray. Shadowing Pastrana’s brown skin, beside a man who is clearly white, the bonneted woman exhibits the “savage” potential that lies behind and within the whiteness of the Victorian middle-class white woman—much as Munby’s speaker feared. The exhibition of “the embalmed nondescript” reduces Pastrana’s humanity to an ugly lesson about the “truth” of corrupted female nature—the showgirl becomes an unsexed, nonwhite creature, a woman whose masculinity has pushed through her skin in the shape of “very pretty whiskers, moustache, and beard,” a woman who exceeds the boundaries of “nature,” whose dead/undead body stands upright as a lesson to the visiting public about the monstrous spectacle all women have the potential to become.

Pastrana Resurrected

Here I want to change gears, to formulate a rather different reading of Pastrana’s dynamic image, for despite these clearly punitive components, there were other factors at play in Pastrana’s exhibitions that demand consideration. In raising this alternate set of interpretive possibilities, I will be turning to recent interest in Pastrana’s story and image, before circling back to the Victorian context I have read thus far.

In the years since we first “met,” Pastrana has been resurrected with a vengeance, reemerging as a powerful symbol, adorning the covers of magazines, books, and playbills. It is not terribly surprising (if nonetheless disappointing) that some of these current representations replicate the dynamics of the freak show, trafficking in sensationalized speculation and hyperbolic phrasing with little regard for truth. For example, Christopher Hals Gylseth and Lars O. Toverud’s book-length biography of Pastrana, just printed in English in 2003, is more melodrama than scholarship; it includes gruesome photos and vast stores of material the authors could neither know nor research. (For example, Gylseth and Toverud write knowingly that Pastrana “no doubt believed that she was the only one in the world to be doomed to a life of such loneliness. Could any man ever love a bearded woman? And would she ever
find such a man? . . . And if it occurred, would he love her for her own sake? Only time would tell; and she had other things to think about.” \(^{35}\) Despite their avowed desire to produce a sympathetic rendering of her life and experiences, these authors continue the trajectory of what might be best described as sideshow representation, portraying Pastrana’s strange body so as to produce shock, horror, fascination, and monetary gain.

There are, however, a growing number of exceptions to the grotesque mode of depiction. As opposed to the Othering so commonly associated with the “normal” subject’s relationship to the “freakish” body, many of these more recent representations articulate a defiant association—an affiliation—with Pastrana. It seems little coincidence that this happens as our culture increasingly assimilates tattooed, pierced, and even scarified bodies, but the current turn to Pastrana often has less to do with her physical differences than with a range of human emotions: suffering, longing, triumph, defiance.

A great many current interpreters have fastened upon Otto Hermann’s remarks about Pastrana in his book *Fahrend Volk*, in which he notes her kindness and records her (perhaps apocryphal) final words, spoken in reference to her husband: “He loves me for my own sake.”\(^ {36}\) While I have found no other record, nor any Victorian interpretations, of these words, they seem central to many modern renditions of her. For example, in Hollywood, the home of plastic surgery, a cinematic Pastrana is in the works and has been under way for some years now. Claire Noto’s original script cast Lent and Pastrana as beauty and the beast (Lent being the beauty—originally to be played by Richard Gere). Noto’s version appealed to American culture’s fascination with remaking fairy tales, and gave the bear woman a happy ending. When I spoke with Steve Longey at the film’s original home, Permut Presentations, back in 2000, he described it as a story with a universal theme, a “classic love story.”\(^ {37}\) Meg Richman, who revised Noto’s script, and the new production company, Sobini Films, has changed the spin somewhat, retaining the love story but making it more tragic than classic. As it stands now, *Fortune of Love*, the movie, is “the beautiful and unusual true story of a dashing showman of freaks, who pursues a woman, rumored to have the face of a beast, in the hopes of displaying her on stage. Driven by his hunger for success, riches and power, he seduces Julia Pastrana into joining his troupe but . . . against all of his initial instincts, he begins to fall in love with her.”\(^ {38}\) This filmic version of Pastrana’s life inverts the animalistic significance of her body in Victorian culture: here, savagery
resides in Lent’s “instincts” against loving “the ugliest woman in the world.” In the twenty-first-century rendition, Pastrana’s body becomes an occasion for educating the “dashing” man into a proper appraisal of inner beauty, so that the film might more accurately merit the title “Civilizing Theodore Lent.”

In that the story remains a tragic love story in which, according to Robin Schorr, president of production at Sobini, Lent “loves her but can’t quite admit it to himself,” the Hollywood Pastrana is clearly reminiscent of Garland-Thomson’s “sensitive monster, whose role it is to instruct, edify, and thus construct the middle-class canonical self.” Working to complicate current definitions of beauty, the film draws upon Pastrana’s body to shake up not only how an audience measures attractiveness but also how they envision the possible shapes of love. However, the “sensitive monster” in this script also reframes the definition of disability. Schorr says that she was drawn to the project because she sees Pastrana as a woman born with an enormous strike against her who refused to see herself as unlucky. The film finds Pastrana complicated and inspirational, a woman who, Schorr says, “has a life spirit that’s weirdly contagious” to both her audiences and those in her life. This rendition of Pastrana has the potential to communicate to her viewers a sense not only of their own “normalcy” but also that cowardice is a less visible form of disability. Within the film’s own lexicon, therefore, the “bear woman” appears distinctly abled.

A 1993 song by the Ass Ponys also turns to Hermann’s records to treat the romantic theme: “she said he loves me for my own sake,” the chorus of “Julia Pastrana” repeats. While the song’s minor chords and sing-along rhythm may invoke the distancing pulse of pity, they also invite commiseration with the emotional poignancy of longing, across a gulf of bodily difference. Pastrana is no edifying lesson here; rather, the Ass Ponys render her story familiar and readily inhabitable; she is a woman deluded by desire, but no more so than many of us have been. Similarly, poet Wendy Rose also writes alliance. In her 1985 poem “Julia,” Rose speaks from the embalmed Pastrana’s perspective: “Oh my husband / tell me again / this is only a dream / I wake from warm,” she pleads, finding in her Pastrana the embodiment of marital betrayal and of the death in (and of) marriage during an era of rampant divorce. In another poem, “Sideshow,” Rose returns to Pastrana to interrogate her label as “The Ugliest Woman in the World”: the poem is direct address, rather than a dramatic monologue, and the speaker honors Pastrana’s subversion of feminine beauty, and claims relationship to her:
I call you
the most beautiful she-wolf,
the highest-flying canary,
the most ancient song,
the most faithful magic.
I call you
my mother and my sister
and my daughter and me.41

Alongside the reverent, transcendent imagery of flight and melody, Rose’s familial lexicon seems an insistent departure from spectatorship. Instead, Rose dispenses with methodologies of looking and thinking that rely upon rigid definitions of human and animal, let alone self and other.

Visual artists have more of a challenge in representing Pastrana without replicating the exploitative dynamics of making a person into an object. A case in point is Holley Bakich, who has produced a series of sculptures depicting sideshow “freaks.” Bakich has little interest in teaching her audience to assume proper middle-class sympathy. Rather, she writes, “‘Freaks’ have, for the most part, an extraordinary acceptance of themselves often lacking in so-called ‘normal’ people.”42 Her Pastrana is positively joyous: a smiling figure in a cheerful, brightly colored dress, perched on a bright pink stage festooned with ribbons and cloudlike flowers (figure 9.5). Bakich embroidered the dance costume by hand and “painstakingly sewed all the little hairs onto her leather body for a more realistically hairy effect.”43 Unlike the majority of promotional materials that presented Pastrana in profile, this rendition gives her back the potential to look: Bakich’s Julia faces her audience straight on. Beautiful, vivid, and almost buoyant, this Pastrana is decidedly designed to project self-possession. Kathleen Anderson Culebro’s painting for the New York production of The True History of the Tragic Life and Triumphant Death of Julia Pastrana, the Ugliest Woman in the World similarly challenges audience expectation by obscuring Pastrana’s head behind a swath of fabric that (nonetheless) names her and her function in Victorian culture (figure 9.6). The body gracefully balanced on one toe, as was Pastrana in many of her promotional posters, is oddly hairless, an artistic choice that recuperates the possible options for the draped head. The headless woman in advertising—such as beer and automobile commercials—would generally imply that a woman’s head does not really matter. Culebro’s painting, however, emphasizes the ways in which Pastrana’s title (“the Ugliest”) was more a function of narrative
than fact. The sprightly pose of the veiled woman becomes playful, engaged, and ludic, suggesting that this woman has a sufficiently settled head on her shoulders to allow her to dance through the words that cover her over.

The play itself, for which Culebro produced the painting, is by British playwright Shaun Prendergast. It premiered in London in 2000 and
made its New York debut in November 2003 (Culebro was the artistic director of the New York production). Like Culebro’s painting, the play repeatedly emphasizes the importance of language to our experiences of the people and situations we encounter. In Prendergast’s script, Lent explicitly proposes,
Hell, words’ll hit you like spitballs
Right in the kisser, nose to nose
Upfront and personal . . .
For the price of a ticket,
You can get every superlative known to Mr Webster.44

And the audience will need a whole dictionary of words to process what Prendergast gives them. The play is meant to be staged in pitch darkness, forcing the audience to rely upon sound and smell to piece together the story.45 Although Pastrana is the only member of the cast to be embellished by physical description, she nonetheless remains unseen, so that one never “knows” what one sees.46 Disrupting the visual dynamics of the freak show, Prendergast’s play is explicitly confrontational, “displaying” an exceptional woman whose physical exceptionality he renders invisible.

The play opens with traditional sideshow barkers hawking admission:

We got Siamese twins and sheep with two heads
And a boy with the face of a fish.
And ghost trains and geeks
And the wild child of Borneo.

And armless wonders and legless wonders and limbless wonders
And parasitic twins. Will wonders never cease?47

These opening lines catalog the distinctions of Victorian freak culture—disability, nationality, hybridity, exceptionality—but offer no visual clue to Pastrana for the first four pages. And then, as Prendergast puts it, “her sweet voice gives the first bodily descriptions in the play.” The audience’s apprehension of Pastrana’s appearance is therefore inescapably enmeshed with the sound of her own voice, made all the more “sweet” for the barkers’ harsh cries at the threshold. In the contrast lies an implicit critique of sideshow culture but also a reminder that, to the best of our knowledge, Pastrana was integrally involved in her own representation.48

Like Suzan-Lori Parks’s Venus, Prendergast’s Julia is hardly a simple story of exploitation.49 Both plays emphasize “scientific” and popular exhibitions as spaces of exchange in which spectators depart with their various forms of data, but the exhibited woman is also a subject who
takes home something she considers valuable. Prendergast’s Pastrana reminds us that the original was a very successful and strategic performer of ugliness—and she was not the ugliest woman in the world (he offers Grace McDaniels, “the Mule-Woman,” to illustrate). Pastrana made a career of performing ugliness and, despite her severely limited options for a “normal” life, she made a successful and relatively comfortable existence for herself.

In his effort to intervene in established narratives about exhibitions and audiences’ responses to them, Prendergast took great pains not to put words into Pastrana’s mouth, and he refused to dictate how the audience should feel (he terms didactic theater “disastrous”). Instead, the playwright aimed “to constantly ask the audience what they thought,” offering them options of response and granting them “permission to be curious.” Real curiosity entails asking questions without foregone conclusions, which allows for interactions that move beyond, or beside, appropriation and negation. And, Prendergast says, the politically correct climate of recent years has all but closed down such possibilities.

When the play was staged in New York, the cast and crew handed out promotional cards in Washington Square Park. “Come see The Ugliest Woman in the World,” they said brightly to passersby, offering cards printed with Culebro’s painting. According to Culebro, various people chided the performers: “We think all women are beautiful,” one couple responded, while others shook their heads in disgust. (For the record, plenty of theatergoers responded positively: the New York production was so successful as to extend its run.) These dismissive responses may initially seem compassionate, but they also smack of the same social training that insists one not “make a spectacle of oneself”: it’s not polite to stare. However, in refusing to let its audience actually see (or stare at) “the ugliest woman in the world,” and yet offering them a vision of her life though language, sound, and smell, the play makes visible other components of identity, producing not only more complicated characters but also a “viewing” experience that confronts the complexity of how the experience of viewing works.

These representations of the “bear woman” depart radically from those generally discussed in “Pastrana studies,” or with regard to Victorian freakery in general. What disciplinary messages they offer have little to do with proper behavior, ostentation, or domestic duty. In addition, with the exception of Culebro, who respectfully insists upon giving Julia her proper Spanish pronunciation, they elide the dynamics of racial, national, and species difference that so powerfully informed
Victorian exhibition culture. Gylseth and Toverud’s lurid biography and Matthew Sweet’s desire to spend “one night with the delectably furry Julia” offer salient reminders that these forms of Othering live on, and that various current readers and viewers encounter even the most empowering of these modern Pastranas only to validate Lennard Davis’s assertion that “most Americans react to the idea of disability with good wishes and a silent prayer to the effect that ‘there but for the grace of God go I.’” Culebro agrees, stating that “we’re not all that much more evolved” than Victorian audiences. Yet I think both would concur that there exist other potential relationships to the anomalous body that are reducible neither to estrangement, nor to reverence, nor to custodial relations of pity.

Reading Affiliation

To be quite personal about it, none of these terms adequately sum up my own experience. As a woman who has struggled all of her life alternately to approximate or to dismiss unattainable standards of beauty, my attraction to Pastrana derives from her embodiment of the persistent failure of female bodies to meet the mark, and of an existential longing for acceptance in a social world where such acceptance is rare. In an age when women in Western culture routinely undergo freakish rituals (Brazilian waxing, fad dieting, Botox injections, liposuction) in order to conform to “normal” standards of attractiveness, I find it no coincidence that Pastrana has reemerged as a figure of resistance and empowerment.

To be sure, in part my response initiates me into the “position of stewardship over the other” that Rosemarie Garland-Thomson criticizes, yet I want to argue that it does so in a manner better described as affiliation than any other term modern theory offers. To the best of my understanding, too, affiliation more accurately designates the various investments of other scholars and interpreters of unusual bodies. Many of us have very personal stakes in resurrecting these figures, in telling these stories. Many of us embrace spectacular bodies not only to mark our differences from them, and not simply to mediate our own differences from the conventions of normalcy, to articulate our own inabilities to fit neatly into a box, but also to work toward some form of social intervention. Alongside viewers’ capacities to feel horror, superiority, or pity, that is, there is the potential for them also to experience feelings
of association or alliance that are engaged and ethically conscious. At the New York performances of Prendergast’s play, Culebro circulated a petition to have Pastrana’s remains returned to Mexico for a proper burial. Bakich writes that she intends her sculptures as “homage.” Schorr remarks that she finds Pastrana “inspirational,” a woman who urges us “to think of what we might all do with ourselves if we had such a will.” And, without naming names, I can identify a great many academics whose bodies or personal histories resonate with the individuals on whom they work.

Current deployments of Victorian freaks offer models that might—and ought—to expand the parameters of how we read not only our own encounters with “the Other” but historical encounters as well. In that interest, therefore, I want to return to some of the Victorian materials I have already read to suggest how the complexity of these representations makes clear that Pastrana’s significance, even in Victorian culture, was emphatically plural. In closing, I would like to consider some of those options both for Victorian culture and for cultural criticism in general.

While it may be easy to disqualify the authenticity of alliance in those Victorian accounts that deem Pastrana a “perfect woman” or remark upon her inherent ability to waltz, other accounts significantly complicate dominant theoretical paradigms for describing relations to the extraordinary body. In the etching of “the embalmed nondescript,” for example, while the echoing position of the bonneted woman may articulate the disciplinary cautions I explore above, one may also read in it a quiet sign of empathy with the disruptive body in the case. One might wonder about the meaning of that glass cage, and in particular about the woman’s right hand, imprisoned under her husband’s arm. Neither woman, that is, appears to have many options for mobility. Similarly, for all of its hyperbolic misogyny, Munby’s poem also articulates a surprising recognition of women’s lack of sovereignty within Victorian culture. The speaker initially remarks of the baboon,

I must confess I was glad to see
That her chain was made fast to the walnut tree;
So she could not manage to get at me,
Were she ever so much inclined; (6)

But he also notes that, as she “gazed at herself, and fondly eyed / Her steel-bright collar and chain: / She seem’d as blithe as a bride full-drest”
The analogy with the imprisonment of marriage becomes even more complex as the baboon, enraged by the speaker’s superior stare, ceases to be so pleased with her accoutrements and begins to mangle and gnaw at the “massive chain,” until she has flattened some of its links into strips. Later, when the speaker notes that the woman at his inn also wears a “white metallic thing / That shines on her throat, like the gleam of a ring” (10), the comparison is complete: the collar appears an enlarged version of the nuptial band. The speaker secures our sympathies to the collared woman when the innkeeper throws a gray shroud over her head, pinions her arms to her chair, and carries her off, fighting and screaming. Flummoxed by this complex and disturbing series of events, the speaker asks no questions:

For in fact I dreaded to hear her tale;
That very word made me turn quite pale,
When I call’d to mind her long wild wail
Of anger and despair . . . (12)

Does the thought of her tale make him blanch because of the homonym with the tails of animals at the zoo, suggesting that the woman ought to be locked up? Or is it that the audible wail proves narrative enough, articulating the “anger and despair” of the marital condition? Even as Munby’s speaker states his “dread” of either of the imprisoned female creatures’ “getting to” him, his narrative expresses sympathy with, albeit mixed with fear of, imprisoned female figures. The “long wild wail” he records exceeds barbarity, registering “despair” as well. It is clear that Pastrana did “get to” Munby, and that she did so complexly—not enough, perhaps, to revise his expectations of femininity and civilization, but sufficiently to prompt contemplation, curiosity, and exploration.

Elsewhere, Wilkie Collins’s depiction of the troublingly hirsute but explicitly engaging Marian Halcombe in The Woman in White emerges shortly after Pastrana’s first London appearance. Walter Hartright’s first response to Marian repeats almost verbatim the rhetoric that various handbills used to promote Pastrana. Consider, for example, his admiration of “the rare beauty of her form” and “the unaffected grace of her attitude” when Marian’s back is turned toward him. His admiration turns to shock when he first sees her face:

Never was the old conventional maxim, that Nature cannot err, more flatly contradicted—never was the fair promise of a lovely figure more
strangely and startlingly belied by the face and head that crowned it. The lady’s complexion was almost swarthy, and the dark down on her upper lip was almost a moustache. She had a large, firm, masculine mouth and jaw; prominent, piercing, resolute brown eyes; and thick, coal-black hair, growing unusually low down on her forehead. . . . To see such a face as this set on shoulders that a sculptor would have longed to model—to be charmed by the modest graces of action through which the symmetrical limbs betrayed their beauty when they moved, and then to be almost repelled by the masculine form and masculine look of the features in which the perfectly shaped figure ended—was to feel a sensation oddly akin to the helpless discomfort familiar to us all in sleep, when we recognise yet cannot reconcile the anomalies and contradictions of a dream.54

The “anomalies and contradictions” that Marian Halcombe provokes for Walter Hartright seem explicitly indebted to the literature that promoted and responded to Julia Pastrana. Consider, for example, the Regent Gallery handbill, which remarks, “her eyes are large and fine, the centre being so jet black that the pupil is scarcely perceptible,” “her mouth is elongated,” “the lower jaw . . . extends much more than ordinary,” “her hair is black, straight, and abundant; her form and limbs are quite perfect,” and of course, “she has thick black hair on the nose, forehead, and every part of her face and person.”55 As Richard Collins observes, “Marian’s ‘modest graces of action’ are reflected in the dancer Pastrana’s ‘good and graceful figure’; Marian’s ‘clear, ringing, pleasant voice’ is echoed in the singer Pastrana’s ‘sweet voice.’ Indeed, Collins’s description of the ‘highly-bred’ Marian could almost stand in for that of Julia Pastrana with her ‘great taste’ in the arts and her linguistic skills.”56 Wilkie Collins’s depiction of his hero, “charmed by the modest graces of action through which the symmetrical limbs betrayed their beauty when they moved, and then . . . almost repelled by the masculine form and masculine look of the features in which the perfectly shaped figure ended,” describes thoroughly many a Victorian man’s response to Julia Pastrana. And yet, Marian Halcombe emerges as one of Collins’s most intelligent and admired heroines. While Hartright initially finds her an “error” of nature, and his initial reaction to his contradictory responses is decidedly feeble—he is “charmed” yet “repulsed” by Marian—he ultimately comes to rely on Laura Fairlie’s savvy, engaging half-sister. To be sure, she is not a serious romantic figure in the novel; Count Fosco’s admiration for her notwithstanding, Marian never marries. Nonetheless, through her, Collins offers a representation of the hirsute woman that expands, rather than reifies, the parameters of acceptability.57
Pastrana’s Victorian exhibitions thus seem to have elicited a range of responses that included not only discrimination, not only pity, but recognition and affiliation as well. That is not to say that these responses evade the dynamics of proprietorship, exploitation, or distortion. Indeed, the problem of replicating sideshow dynamics is familiar to academics who work on freakery: we reproduce images, we cite handbills, we resurrect the call to “look at this!”—just as I have asked you throughout this essay to look at “the ugliest woman in the world.” Generally, scholarship of freaks is politically inflected, meant to reappraise the original dynamics of representation. Often, such reappraisals offer the opportunity to condemn sideshow culture as exploitative and cruel, or to educate modern readers into a more humane perspective on what we now term the dis- or differently abled body.

Alternatively, my aim in this essay has been to reappraise the exploitations of freakery, not as a means to “correct” those “bad” Victorians who went to see Pastrana, but rather to add to our resources for reading her and other extraordinary bodies. Modern renditions of Julia Pastrana have augmented the potential meanings I now find in the Victorian texts I have known for many years, and have expanded a theoretical vocabulary the “abilities” of which had come to feel limited. The dynamics of affiliation do not escape the problems of exploitation, nor do they avoid the intense problematics involved in “speaking for” another person. However, they can significantly complicate both how we envision the work we do and how we understand the cultures and bodies we explore.

Notes

1. These are reproduced later in this essay as figures 9.3 and 9.4.
2. Pastrana’s “bearlike” appearance was due to gingival hyperplasia and congenital hypertrichosis terminalis. See Jan Bondeson, A Cabinet of Medical Curiosities (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 241–42.
3. The source most frequently cited with regard to Pastrana’s life is Otto Hermann, Fahrend Volk (Leipzig: Weber, 1895).
4. The grossly Gothic introduction to Christopher Hals Gylseth and Lars O. Toverud’s 2003 biography suggests that less “serious” researchers also have access to her body. The following, in any case, is not standard medical discourse: “In the vaults in Oslo, the flickering light reveals the contents of the hospital’s basement room. . . . All at once, you are inside medicine’s innermost chamber of horrors. Twisted shadows are cast upon the walls. . . . Light filters through turbid liquids of varying colour and uncertain composition to reveal a macabre collection of body

5. For more on Bartels, see Frederick Drimmer, *Very Special People: The Struggles, Loves, and Triumphs of Human Oddities* (New York: Amjon Publishers, 1973), 374–76. Bondeson notes that her disorder was radically different from Pastrana’s; Bartels’s was secondary hypertrichosis.

6. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson argues convincingly that Pastrana is best understood in her status as hybrid. She writes, “Pastrana’s body confused in several ways a number of the orthodox categories of being upon which the social structure was hung.” She cites “five foundational oppositions that structured the nineteenth-century social order[: . . . human/animal, civilized/primitive, normal/pathological, male/female, and self/other.” See “Narratives of Deviance and Delight Staring at Julia Pastrana, the ‘Extraordinary Lady,’” in *Beyond the Binary: Reconstructing Cultural Identity in a Multicultural Context*, ed. Tim Powell (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999), 90.

7. Lennard J. Davis neatly sums up the historical background to this approach, noting that the term “normal” emerges in English in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, alongside the new science of statistics. Prior to that period, bodies had been understood within the discourse of the “ideal,” whereby no actual body measured up. However, Davis argues, “the new ideal of ranked order is powered by the imperative of the norm and then is supplemented by the notion of progress, human perfectibility, and the elimination of deviance, to create a dominating, hegemonic vision of what the human body should be.” See “Constructing Normalcy: The Bell Curve, the Novel, and the Invention of the Disabled Body in the Nineteenth Century,” in *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. Lennard J. Davis (New York: Routledge, 1997), 17. See also Davis’s *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (London: Verso, 1995).


9. Qtd. in *Account of Miss Pastrana, the Nondescript; and the Double-Bodied Boy* (London: E. Hancock, J. W. Burrows, Printer, [1857]), 12.

10. Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, and Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 76, 84. “The secret self” derives from Leslie Fiedler’s influential study of freakery, published in 1978. Fiedler’s study has come under considerable fire for its overly reverent perspective: as Brian Rosenberg notes, Fiedler renders the freak an “art-object, described in terms usually reserved for painting and poems” (302). Robert Bogdan writes that although Fiedler sets out to critique the dynamic of the freak show, he nonetheless replicates it by making the freaks themselves, rather than their audiences, the subjects of his study. See Leslie Fiedler, *Freaks: Myths and Human Images of the Secret Self* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978); Brian Rosenberg, “Teaching Freaks,” in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the*

11. My colleague Mindy Fenske has been instrumental in helping me consolidate my intuitions about affiliation. Fenske’s essay “The Aesthetic of the Unfinished: Ethics and Performance” (*Text and Performance Quarterly* 24 (2004): 1–19) argues for an interpretive practice that refuses both closure and the illusion of conciliation, and offers a model of ethical engagement that foregrounds the problems of reciprocity.


13. See, for example, Guy Debord’s 1992 introduction to *The Society of the Spectacle*, originally published in 1967, in which he justifies his assertion that he is “not someone who revises his work”: “A critical theory of the kind presented here needed no changing—not as long, at any rate, as the general conditions of the long historical period that it was the first to describe accurately were still intact.” I am suggesting, contra Debord, that such revision is decidedly necessary. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995), 7.


15. I draw upon this perspective as stereotype but acknowledge its lack of historical complication. In actuality, the stage provided possibilities of income and class transcendence for women of various classes, and many actresses did manage to secure an opinion of respectability from all but the most excruciatingly religious judges. Nonetheless, the majority of popular print materials roundly denounce women’s participating in the profession of acting and the principles of female display in general. See Tracy Davis, *Actresses as Working Women: Their Social Identity in Victorian England* (New York: Routledge, 1991).


21. See chapter 5 of Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), and chapter 3 of Carol Mavor’s *Pleasures Taken: Performances of Sexuality and Loss in Victorian Photographs* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995) for other extended discussions of the role of soap in constructing whiteness. Incidentally, soap ads are the stuff of late-Victorian England, a point that Mavor and McClintock rather problematically elide. Exhibitions relied upon a similar logic as soap advertisements, but as I discuss below, exhibition dynamics and implications are not simply interchangeable with
those of Pears’. The Unilever Corporation, which now owns Pears’, in no way endorses or supports the rhetoric of these historical advertisements.


23. Handbill promoting the Aztec Children, 1853. Bodleian Library, John Johnson Collection, Exhibition Catalogues 34.

24. Beyond the groups of people in foreign attire, these exhibitions also displayed the biases by which those who failed to conform to British standards of civilization were deprived of cultural, international, and racial power.


26. Ibid., 226.

27. Ibid., 230–31.

28. The messages of these exhibitions were, not surprisingly, explicitly gendered. Saartjie Baartman, otherwise known as “the Hottentot Venus,” both ushered the practice of exhibition into the nineteenth century and established a corporeal stereotype for primitive sexuality. Medical men, authors, and a wide variety of spectators learned through Baartman’s steatopygia that there was a link between distended physiology and an eroticism that was neither English nor white. Popular discourse surrounding Baartman established a precedent that compounded display, corrupt femininity, racial color, eroticism, and dirt, a conglomeration that was transferred to Victorian prostitutes and to other white women who too bawdily entered the field of vision. For more on Baartman, see Richard Altick, The Shows of London (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1978).


30. Ibid.

31. Account of Miss Pastrana, 6.

32. “Digger Indian” is an invented category, ostensibly including the Shoshonees or Snakes, and the Utahs. According to the Account of Miss Pastrana, “The term ‘Digger’ is applied to all of these Indians, wherever located, in consequence of the method of procuring their food, which consists principally of grass-hoppers, anils and wasps. They are very fond of a certain little animal which the Bible tells us greatly afflicted the Egyptians in the days of Pharaoh. The California grass-hoppers, however, mainly compose their mess” (6). According to Garland-Thomson and Bondeson, the term is entirely apocryphal.


34. Janet Browne and Sharon Messenger, “Victorian Spectacle: Julia Pastrana, the Bearded and Hairy Female,” Endeavour 27, no. 4 (2003): 159. See also Garland-Thomson, “Narratives.” The Era remarked that her body “might, but for the silence of the tongue, be regarded as still living” (March 16, 1862, quoted in Burlington Gallery handbill, John Johnson Collection, Human Freaks 2; original emphasis).
35. Gylseth and Toverud, 6. See also note 4, above, and their account of her birth, marked by “a horrified shriek [that] echoes through the forest” (1). The book is so terribly bad that even the sensational Matthew Sweet condemns it as so much “fanciful detail and hindsighted moralizing.” But Sweet’s review of the book in the London Independent is little better in approach. Despite his critique, he takes the occasion to indulge in his own fetishized objectification: “Of all the eminent Victorians I’d like to have round for dinner,” he writes, “Julia Pastrana the Baboon Lady tops the list. . . . She’d stroke her luxuriant beard, and reveal whether her marriage to her manager, Theodore Lent, was a love-match. . . . Oh for one night with the delectably furry Julia!” London Independent (21 December 2003): 13.

36. Hermann, 125. See, for example, Garland-Thomson, “Narratives,” 100.
37. Interview by phone (December 18, 2000).
40. The song’s final stanza is also memorable: “poor julia was injured inside / and soon followed her son to the grave / her husband had them mummified / and toured until he went insane.”
42. Holley Bakich, “The Bakich Sideshow,” available at http://www.geocities.com/holleybak/julia.html. Other representatives in her collection include the three-legged man, Francesco Lentini; Robert Wadlow, the world’s tallest man; Baby Thelma, a “fat lady”; Prince Randion, the “caterpillar man”; Johnny Eckhardt, “the half boy”; William Henry Johnson, otherwise known as “Zip”; and Horace Ridler, the “zebra man.”
43. Ibid.
45. Amphibian Productions, which put on the play in New York, revised the staging to include roughly three minutes of light at the outset to help establish ambiance. Prendergast fought stridently against this choice, feeling that it removed the audience’s visual curiosity about the other characters, which was integral to the play’s democratic ethic.
46. Prendergast notes that he was striving to make Julia Pastrana a real person, one who “went home at the end of a day, who had a cup of tea, who had a nice house.” Interviews with Shaun Prendergast, by phone April 22, 2004, and in London, May 13, 2004. All subsequent quotations derive from these conversations.
48. For a critique of exhibited people’s consent, see David A. Gerber, “The ‘Careers’ of People Exhibited in Freak Shows: The Problem of Volition and Valorization,” in Garland-Thomson, Freakery, 38–56. Gerber rightly points out that few “freaks” had many options for “normal” employment. I find problematic, however, his refusal to allow their careers as careers, especially when the performers conceived of them as such.
49. Much of the disturbing power of Parks's play derives from its complicated arguments about the Hottentot Venus's “exploitation.” While the doctors, showmen, and audiences that come to see the Venus are clearly exploitive, her Venus is an explicitly willing participant. Suzan-Lori Parks, Venus: A Play (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1997).

50. Kathleen Anderson Culebro, interview by phone (March 4, 2004). All subsequent quotations derive from this conversation.


52. “The sentimental relationship is nonreciprocal as it elevates the self into a position of stewardship over the other.” Garland-Thomson, “Making Freaks,” 141.

53. There is room for further scholarship in the “freak show” of The Swan, a Fox network reality TV show, in which perfectly acceptable, if ordinary, women submitted themselves to a “Dream Team of experts” including cosmetic surgeons, a cosmetic dentist, a personal trainer, a “life coach,” and a therapist, so that they could become beautiful. For more on The Swan, see the cover story of People from June 7, 2004.


55. “Grand and Novel Attraction.” See also the record of Victorian naturalist Francis T. Buckland, who spoke with Pastrana during her 1857 London levees: “Her eyes were deep black, and somewhat prominent, and their lids had long, thick eyelashes; her features were simply hideous on account of the profusion of hair growing on her forehead, and her black beard; but her figure was exceedingly good and graceful.” Curiosities of Natural History, vol. 4 (London: Bentley, 1903), 41. Richard Collins also notes this concordance in his essay “Marian’s Moustache: Bearded Ladies, Hermaphrodites, and Intersexual Collage in The Woman in White,” in Reality’s Dark Light: The Sensational Wilkie Collins, ed. Maria K. Bachman and Don Richard Cox (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2003).

56. Richard Collins, 41.

57. Richard Collins argues that Marian’s “defect . . . made her all the more appealing” to readers, noting that various “men responded [to her] by proposing marriage” (132).

58. Shaun Prendergast has said overtly, “I exploit Julia just as much as Lent did.” Perhaps in degree, but not in kind: it is clear to me that Prendergast’s exploitation is not “the same as” Lent’s.
