

Reflections at the Gene Pool:  
Literary Genealogies and Genetic Legacies in Katherine Dunn's Geek Love



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B.A. English Honors Thesis  
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Leona with the alligator tail would definitely have been a keeper. Leona would have had her own tent and glow-in-the dark posters in silver and green. Arty mused wistfully, "Papa was very excited about Leona. He thought about showing her in a tank. He was hoping she'd stay hairless but he could have depilated her if she'd started sprouting. He even thought about putting her in with me. Papa saw the billing as tadpoles. Different stages of tadpoles" (Dunn 76)

In Geek Love, Dunn proffers a vision of a human family –The Fabulous Binewskis— that moves from the American Dream into a postmodern paradigm. Through the study of the Binewski family's teratogenesis, the unconscious horror of the American Nightmare is brought to consciousness. The fixed construct of normalcy is thrown into chaos. The disabled body is located at the center of the cultural matrix where its lived experience is allowed to flourish, and to also parody the habits of the normate. As a result, the binary of the abnormal body and the normal body is broken down and thus the discovery that the narrow definition of acceptable genetic expression may be cultivating a defective body. Ultimately, what happens to the "survival of the fittest" competitive scheme of social Darwinism if the genetic counselor is a Jackson Pollock, a Pablo Picasso or Geek Love's patriarch, Al "Papa" Binewski?

Dunn relies on a rich cross-fertilization of classic texts of western thought and values that could be found in many white, upper-middle-class homes of the 1950s and 60s. The Bible and Greek mythology are recombined with Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath, Darwin's Origin of the Species and The Descent of Man, as well as Shakespeare's plays to help portray this fabulously nuclear family.

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"I smile and open my eyes so they can tell in the dapple reflections on the water that my eyes are a deep rose pink rather than red. [...] [The four little girls] are telling themselves that I was 'born that way,' which is a reassurance for them[...]"<sup>1</sup>

1. "STEP UP FRIENDS

[TO] A VISION OF THE MIRACULOUS EXTRAVAGANCE OF NATURE FOR THE  
SAME SIMPLE PRICE AS AN OVERCOOKED HOTDOG"<sup>2</sup>

Leona with the alligator tail would definitely have been a keeper. Leona would have had her own tent and glow-in-the dark posters in silver and green. Arty mused wistfully, "Papa was very excited about Leona. He thought about showing her in a tank. He was hoping she'd stay hairless but he could have depilated her if she'd started sprouting. He even thought about putting her in with me. Papa saw the billing as tadpoles. Different stages of tadpoles" (Dunn 76)

As a perfect postmodernist paradigm, the Human Genome Project has captured much of the world's imagination during the past decade. Interest is high because everybody has a genetic configuration that defines the architecture and systems of the body. The Human Genome Project exposes any body to critical issues such as compromised medical privacy, cloning, and other ethical problems. Access to the genetic master plan engenders an astounding myriad of social

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<sup>1</sup> (Dunn 326)

<sup>2</sup> (Dunn 46)

considerations whose intricacies rival those of the chromosomal sequential variations that are scattered throughout the genome. In other words, bioethical issues are as innumerable as the possible kinds of phenotypes.

One issue at hand (a hand that does not necessarily possess five fingers) is the concept of genetic expression. Specifically, what does it take to judge a particular genetic combination a genetic disorder? Moreover, what exactly constitutes a birth defect? What criteria make a body normal? More importantly, what sort of body is legitimately whole enough to pass a genetic counselor's test? Ultimately, what happens to the "survival of the fittest" competitive scheme of social Darwinism if the genetic counselor is a Jackson Pollock, a Pablo Picasso or Geek Love's patriarch, Al "Papa" Binewski?<sup>3</sup>

On ~~the~~ [an]other hand, the notions of pedigree and selective breeding precede Charles Darwin's natural selection theory.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile his successors seem to have culled the science of eugenics from the archipelagos of their minds.<sup>5</sup> For example, in 1883, Darwin's cousin, Francis Galton, derived the word eugenics from the Greek "well-born." For Galton, the term eugenics is:

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<sup>3</sup> "The English philosopher Bertrand Russell made an observation that is relevant to [the notion of biological hierarchy]. He said that the whole great progress of evolution proceeds from the poor single-cell protozoan up, through the struggle of survival, over eons of time to the ultimate culmination of nature's evolutionary force: the philosopher. 'Of course,' mused Russell, 'it is the philosopher who makes this judgment, and not the protozoan'" (Gallagher 79).

<sup>4</sup> Common linguistic phrases such as "on the other hand" demonstrate the expectation of a bodily norm. The phrase "on the other hand" establishes a body that is relegated to only two hands; "on another hand" is a phrase that allows for multiple bodily possibilities.

<sup>5</sup> In Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness and the Body, Lennard Davis discloses that all of the early statisticians were also eugenicists. Their applied biology of eugenics is based on the statistical bell curve and Darwinian theory to establish normal and non-normal bodies. Davis contends that the fact that the "inviolable rule of statistics is that all phenomena will always conform to a bell curve" implies that the eugenic pursuit of eliminating the abnormal body is paradoxical. There will always be an abnormal body in a bell curve template. (Davis 30) My statement argues that eugenic authority is a fallacious invention.

In a sardonic way, perhaps freak show circus owner P.T. Barnum could be considered the first critic of Darwin's theory. Only three months after the publication of The Origin of the Species, Barnum presents the "missing link" in his "What is it?" show. Barnum races a disabled Italian New York actor black for his first "missing link" (Cook 142). The figure, purported to have been captured from the interior of Africa, attracted huge numbers of white upper middle class antebellum New Yorkers. (Cook 140, 144) Barnum's behind the scene slapstick manipulations of cultural representations shows the ease with which science slips on the banana peel of

a brief word to express the science of improving stock, which is by no means confined to questions of judicious mating, but which, especially in the case of man [sic], takes cognizance of all the influences that tend in however remote a degree to give the more suitable races or strains of blood a better chance of prevailing speedily over the less suitable than they otherwise would have had. (qtd. in Hubbard 188)

Moreover, the definition of eugenics evolved in the United States to mean the discouragement of reproduction of negative traits and the encouragement of positive traits.<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, the Weimar Republic's racial hygiene program paralleled, mirrored and was influenced by the American eugenics movement (Hubbard 188-192).

The purpose of my line of thinking up to now is to highlight how the history of the consciousness of heredity predates the Human Genome Project. The traditions of breeding, hybridism, and sterilization prove that manipulation of genetic expression is not a postmodern concept. Additionally, these instances encourage the reader to rethink contemporary ideals of the elements that constitute bodily wholeness and normalcy. Two heads may or may not be better than one; the issue is that genetic hierarchy is not necessarily based in biological truth. The philosophical origins of genetic hierarchy are generally specious assumptions that can be mapped as far back as the Aristotle's categories of the material world where "man" is ranked at the top and where woman is considered monstrous. (Deutsch and Nussbaum 10) The biological conceit of the monster then extends all the way from antiquity through the present day impetus for contemporary genetic research that seeks the causes and cures for teratogenetic conditions.<sup>7</sup>

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racist and ableist perception. Of course, the politicization of the body has wide reaching ramifications within the discourses on slavery as well as disability history.

<sup>6</sup> Alexander Graham Bell presented a speech in 1883 in which he worried that a race of deaf-mutes was evolving due to the tendency of deaf-mutes' preference of other deaf-mutes for marriage partners. (Lennard) However, Charles Davenport, the most vociferous early American eugenicists, laid the groundwork that led to the first laws for involuntary sterilization, as well as for the first immigration laws that screen for deformities; these laws appeared in 1907 and 1924 respectively. (Hubbard 190-1)

<sup>7</sup> The words teratogenetic, teratogenesis, teratogeny originated circa 1900-1905 as per the Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language. Their root "tera" comes from the greek word for monster. Note the timing of their invention in chronological relation with the timing of Galton's creation of the word eugenic.

The Binewski family in Katherine Dunn's 1989 novel, Geek Love, celebrates an American heritage of the self-made individual while embracing the chaos and technology of the violent American philosophy in a way that turns the American dream inside out to manifest a story of a contemporary teratogenesis. Section 2 elaborates on the Binewski family's exploits. Section 3 discusses the literary genealogies of the disabled body with regard to the specifics of the Binewski teratogenesis. Dunn deploys a white Baby Boomer perspective in the character Olympia Binewski who narrates her transition from the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century into the century's second half. Olympia recounts her childhood in the Binewski Carnival Fabulon, a carnivalesque Eden that privileges the disabled body, and then her subsequent expulsion into a contemporary U.S. society that devalues the disabled body.

Dunn relies on a rich cross-fertilization of classic texts of western thought and values that could be found in many white, upper-middle-class homes of the 1950s and 60s. The Bible and Greek mythology are recombined with Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath, Darwin's Origin of the Species and The Descent of Man, as well as Shakespeare's plays. In Geek Love's mournful postmodern tour de force, Al and Lil stand as the Biblical archetypes Adam and Lilith. Al and Lil along with their children, whose names generally come from Greek mythology and Shakespeare's The Tempest, form a carnival family that travels the United States. The Binewskis' nomadic movements are reminiscent of the migrating Joad family of The Grapes of Wrath; both families must struggle with the affront of a social Darwinian economy, but the Binewskis' means to fiscal success literally complicates Darwin's theory of natural selection.

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Also note that the terms teratological and teratologist were in place by the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Additionally, in his Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self, Leslie Fiedler notes Linneaus' 1775 10<sup>th</sup> edition of System of Nature. Linneaus separates "Homo Sapiens from Homo monstrous and Homo ferus. Implicit in such a classification is the assumption of a hierarchal order, which beginning with 'montrous man,' mounts to 'wild man,' and climbing upward through black, brown, yellow, and red men, climaxes in the white European" (Fiedler 240).

Meanwhile, Geek Love's postmodern effect also seems grafted from the ambience of the suburban family room where the television's glare and glare of situation comedies spew a blunt, and coarse American-Anglo Saxon language. In this case, the reverberating patter from the 1960s TV show The Munsters rattles the nearby closet door that stores Life magazines from the 1940s that contain photo essays of the Nazi death camps. Section 4 elaborates on how the horrific macabre of World War II serves as the Baby Boomer's equivalent of the Early Modern fetish for the memento mori. Monstrous bodies in families like the Munsters and the Binewskis reconfigure the desired normal bodies of a nuclear family to give physical form to the Baby Boomer angst over the reality of the normate bodies that populate the American Dream and its horrific inverse, the American nightmare.<sup>8</sup>

In "Modernist Freaks and Postmodern Geeks: Literary Contortions of the Body," David Mitchell describes how many Disability Studies scholars take issue with the reductionism inherent in the literary tradition of using the disabled body as a conceit for social chaos. When I posit the bodies of the Binewski family as representative of Baby Boomer angst, I come close to cataloguing Geek Love as part of this long tradition of the parasitic opportunism of the literary imagination upon the disabled body. A thesis that utilizes the disabled body in its narrative in this way can be thusly termed a "prosthesis" according to Mitchell and Snyder's Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependence of Discourse. (Mitchell and Snyder 1) However, in "The First Child Born into the World Was Born Deformed': Disability Representations in these Times," Mitchell and Snyder contest the theory that such a literary tradition merely reduces the disabled body as a simple signifier of the abnormal. "There is no universal narrative that can do justice to the variegated historical patterning of its material meanings" (Mitchell and Snyder

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<sup>8</sup> The word "normate" is Rosmarie Garland Thomson's invention to help mark, with an ironic twist that challenges the validity of normal, the unexamined center of the cultural matrix. (Linton 24)

164). I likewise contend that the specific narrative in Geek Love extends the disabled body beyond a simplistic conceit for Baby Boomer angst by locating the historic radioactively exposed bodies of the Atomic Age inside a nuclear family of carnival freaks. The complication of the combined coordinates allows for the disabled body to command center stage with a discourse that displaces normalcy from the center of the political matrix.

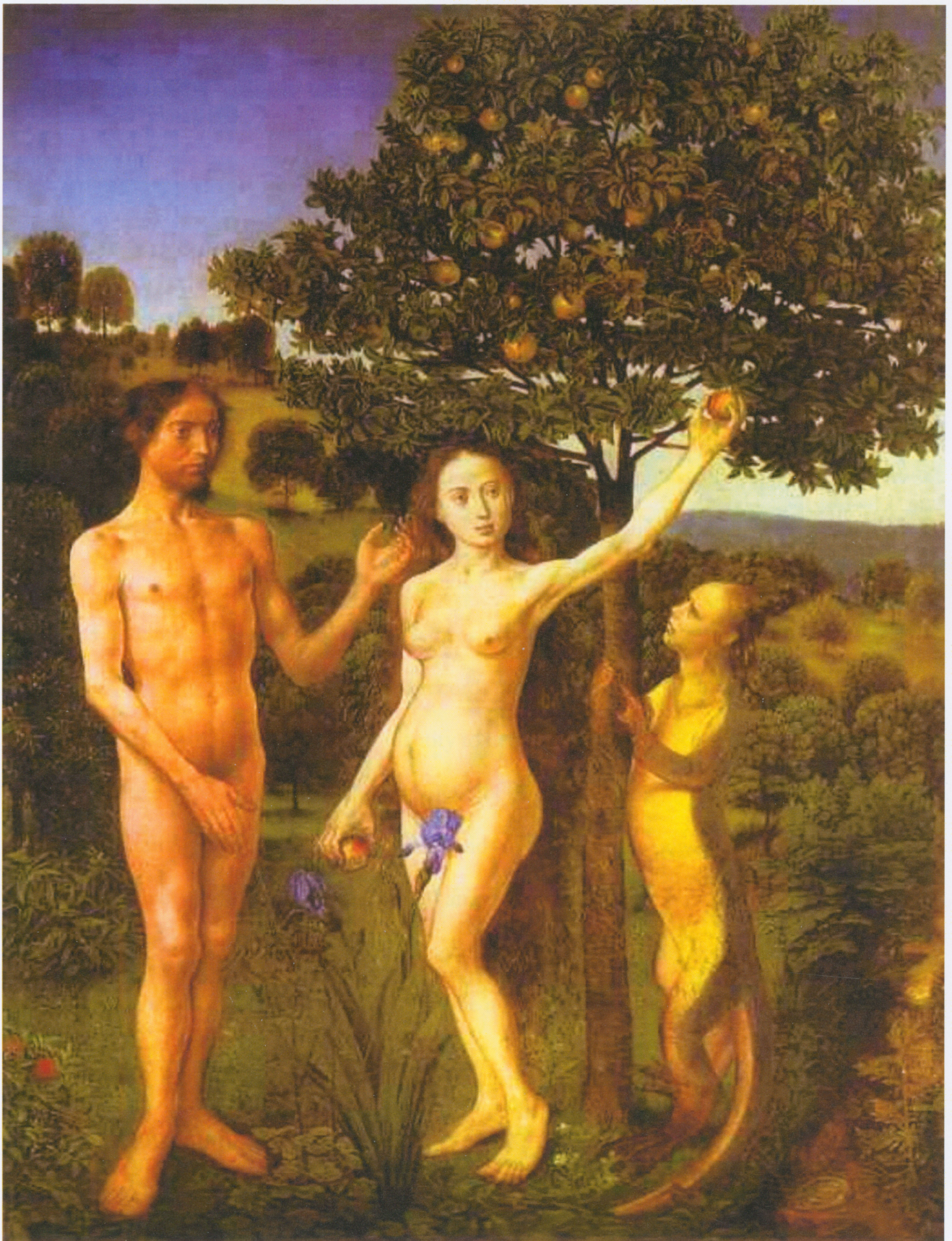
Meanwhile, in a 1989 Publishers Weekly interview, Dunn corroborates her generation's preoccupation with the spectacle of the Holocaust and its associations by relaying a personal anecdote of how the Holocaust permeated her formative years:

When I was about five years old, I came across a Life magazine with photos from the concentration camps. Those pictures were scarred into my corneas and they'll be there till I croak. My thought was, *I'll* be a victim. My mother, my brothers, we're all in danger. Later that turned into a defensive fury: Why didn't they fight back? Then later still, you discover that you're no longer just aware of the victim's point of view; you discover in yourself the capacity to be the perpetrator as well. (Steinberg 66)

Dunn accords a similar concept of the effects of environment on the memory of a developing child in Geek Love, "Miranda seems preoccupied with deformity. [...] There is no obvious reason for such a fascination in her own life, [...]. It may be that the impressions of her infancy are caught somehow in the pulp of her eyes, luring her" (Dunn 15). However, it is Miranda's father, Arty in his extraordinary congenital figure, who is simultaneously most capable of articulating the socially oppressed status of the disabled body—a body, along with the bodies of Jews, Gypsies and other marginalized groups, that was attacked in the holocaust for its perceived biological inferiority—while evolving into a villainous insatiable despot. Dunn's postmodern intent purports that the body is a prosthetic for the mind; and, if the body can be made spectacular—either as the perfect German Volk, or the white American Baby Boomer, or as sagaciously supernatural, or as glamorously talented—the mind can commodify its body for a

pretty penny. Moreover, competing spectacular bodies must be denigrated, or disappeared in order to preserve the centrality of the prized spectacular body: it's necessarily lonely at the top.

Arty, in his obsession for power, demeans and subjugates his siblings to the point where one of them spontaneously combusts out of frustration thereby emitting a firestorm, like the Allied bombing of Dresden, which turns the family's world into a literal holocaust. In the end, Arty's body is reconfigured into the boiled and cremated form that is reminiscent of the remains of the disabled bodies found at Nazi orphanages that were ritually suffocated in heat sealed rooms and then cremated. Thus, Geek Love's disabled Baby Boomer narrator exhortation for her daughter Miranda to, "Please note that cremation is a family tradition," becomes a macabre signifier that extends not only to the European-American 20<sup>th</sup> century experience with World War II, but also to the disabled community's cultural memory.



Goes, Hugo van der. The Fall of Adam. Before 1470.  
Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

2. THE FABULOUS BINEWSKIS  
PARENTS — THE BEAUTEOUS CRYSTAL LILY & RING MASTER AL  
FORTUNATO — THE STRONGEST CHILD IN THE WORLD  
ARTURO — THE AMAZING AQUA BOY  
THE MAGNIFICENT MUSICAL SIAMESE TWINS — ELECTRA AND IPHIGENIA  
ALBINO — OLYMPIA  
GRAND DAUGHTER — MIRANDA

Geek Love is about the notorious carnival family, the Binewskis. The story, as narrated by Olympia Binewski, jumps between two plots. One plot traces the heydays and subsequent demise of the Binewski Carnival Fabulon. Olympia details the circumstances under which her parents attempt to mitigate the financial crisis of their traveling freak show's loss of revenue due to a lack of acts. Al and Lillian Binewski decide to repopulate the show by giving birth to a family of children with rare congenital physiques.

In Geek Love's other plot Olympia records the final weeks in her life as she is confronted with the necessity of revealing her true identity to her "almost normal" twenty-year-old daughter, Miranda. The compelling drama of this second plot hinges on Olympia's defense of her daughter's naturally unique body. Olympia intends to eliminate the powerful Mary Lick who attempts to bribe Miranda into having her tail amputated. Miranda, who was raised in a world full of "norms" at a Catholic orphanage, is uncertain if her tail is a legitimate feature for her body, "Is it sane to like my tail?" (Dunn 33) The nuns told her "it was a cross to bear and a punishment for [her] mother's sins" (Dunn 32).

In Geek Love, the earliest remembered Binewski is Grandpa who once cautioned Al, "If you don't mess with the monkey, the monkey won't mess with you" (Dunn 106). His "boychik" son Aloysius Binewski inherits the family traveling carnival business sometime during the 1930s

when his father, “Grandpa,” dies.<sup>9</sup> With no mention of a mother, Al enshrines the loving memory of his father by bolting a loving cup full of his cremated remains to the hood of the generator truck. Like the lone male Judeo-Christian God’s ubiquitous presence in the lives of his believers, Grandpa’s loving cup urn looms as a patriarchal godhead throughout Geek Love. Occasionally, a troubled or sleepy grandchild will sidle up to the urn for solace or a nap.

Unfortunately for Al, the freak show industry is in decline when the family business falls into his hands. However, WWII is under way and the shortage of stateside male laborers allows for women such as Lillian Hinchcliff to enter professional roles previously reserved for men. Ticket sales increase when Lillian volunteers to be the resident geek. Unlike the cliché “Wild Man” acts of her predecessors, “Crystal Lil” approaches geeking by costuming herself in apparel slightly less lascivious than “Diamond Lil’s” wardrobe in Mae West’s novel. The name Crystal is aligned with the decorum of Lillian’s reserved aristocratic Bostonian heritage in contrast with Diamond Lil’s gaudy 15-carat stage name that is indicative of the showy wealth she needs to counteract a lifetime of poverty in the slums. (West 76)

Lillian’s refined aesthetic bearing informs her performance sensibility as well; in the geek pit, she chooses to sing from Schubert’s repertoire as though she is entertaining at an evening recital in her family’s mansion. In the geek pit, singing Schubert is a handy vehicle of diversion while she chases the nervous chicks. Al recognizes Lillian’s upper class formality; “There never was [...] such a champagne approach to the blood” (6). The antithetical juxtaposition of a beautiful highly cultured young woman biting off the head of a chicken intrigues and delights the carnival goers; Crystal Lil becomes a big attraction. But Lillian prefers a profession as an aerialist. Unfortunately, a fall from the trapeze causes a debilitating injury that cuts short Lil’s career as any kind of performer.

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<sup>9</sup> “Boychik” is slang of Slavic origins that means boy or young man. Al is 24 years old when his father dies.

Al courted Lil as he ministered to her injuries. Their subsequent marriage led them to their next business venture, parenting talented children.

Al and Lil enter their marriage free of an involved extended family. Al Binewski's name in addition to his frequent vulgar invocations of the Virgin Mary suggests that his father probably rolled in illiterate, hungry, tired and poor with the eastern European Catholic immigration wave during the first half of the century. There is no mention of relatives other than his deceased father. Lillian is a prodigal daughter from an established Protestant Beacon Hill family. Her family ties appear severed. Amidst their isolation from extra familial influence they become progenitors of a new kind of family. The story of Al and Lillian Binewski is what would have happened if the transgressor Lilith stayed with Adam; Grandpa's ubiquitous presence symbolizes God the Creator.<sup>10</sup>

If Al and Lil represent Adam and Lilith, then the Binewski Carnival Fabulon is the Garden of Eden. In this garden the apple of knowledge is the cultivated rose as inspired by the Rose Garden in Portland, Oregon. The carnival's loss of Lil's drawing power, in addition to the defection of various 'freaks' places Al in a financial crisis. The designer roses in Portland spark him to imagine the idea of breeding designer children whose congenitally rare bodies could attract an audience. The assurance of an inherently lucrative future for her children blends well with Lillian's aristocratic nature, so she wholeheartedly supports Al's idea to parent a freak show.

The Binewskis plan the teratogenesis by exposing pregnant Lil to radioactive materials and various drugs. They exhibit in jars full of formaldehyde the six bodies of those who didn't come to term or who didn't survive infancy. Arturo was their second attempt, and the first to

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<sup>10</sup> The allusion to Lil as Lilith is further grounded in Geek Love by a tiger name Lilith who Oly said was named after Lil. This tiger enacts one of the most popular stories about Lilith as the female who rejects Adam. Lilith the tiger rejects the mating advances of all the male tigers. (Dunn 297)

live. Three attempts later, Iphigenia and Electra, conjoined twins, were born. Two tries later Olympia arrived. And finally Fortunato/Chick was the latter of two more tries.

The plan to revitalize the Binewski Carnival Fabulon succeeds. The Binewski children—Arty, Electra and Iphigenia—with their “amazing” bodies become child stars of the freak show business.

Electra and Iphigenia were high-powered performers, they rung your heart, cramped your brain, brought silence on thousands for half an hour at a time. And the crowds that watched Arturo were funneled out of themselves, pumped into the reservoir of his will. (Dunn 17)

The beautiful dark haired conjoined twins *Elly* and *Iphy* make brilliant musical use of their four hands playing duets with extraordinarily creative compositional arrangements. The twins’ represent the kind of sideshow performance technique that in *Freak Show*, Robert Bogdan describes as the “‘high’ aggrandized mode” (Bogdan 166). The high aggrandized mode of presentation wraps the disabled body as a talented glamorous stage idol. (Bogdan 166). The Binewski sisters emulate the real life Hilton sisters who were groomed for manners, appearance and rigorously trained as musicians. As per Bogdan, “the Hilton sisters were presented as attractive, engaging celebrities who were exceptionally talented, charming, happy, and normal in every way except for one physical inconvenience: in their case, being born joined at the buttocks” (Bogdan 166). Olympia’s barker spiel for Elly and Iphy’s act exquisitely frames the lyric understatement of their disability. “‘Siamese beauties linked in harmonious perpetuity...’ I always had a great time with ‘perpetuity’—it was a word you could play like a flute, rolling it up a full octave and whistling ‘Dixie’ on that last syllable” (Dunn 181).

The central features of Arty’s physique are his baldness and his extremities of “flippers” in place of arms and legs. The approximate pathological descriptors for Arty’s corporeality are “phocomelia” – a usually congenital deformity of the extremities in which the limbs are

abnormally short – and “syndactylism” – having united or webbed fingers or toes. The colloquial characterization of Arty’s extremities as “flippers” evokes his performance persona as “Arturo the Aqua Boy” whereby he fosters the impression that he lived in water like an aquarium fish. “It was a central charm of his act that, though he looked and acted alien, part animal, part myth, he would prop his chin on the lip of the tank to talk ‘just like folks.’ Only it wasn’t quite like folks” (Dunn 49). While the twins, with their teen idol status, have fan clubs, Arty develops a cult messianic following called Arturism.

Arturism is a spin-off of the word teratism which means “love or worship of the monstrous.”<sup>11</sup> Arturism is the adoration of a limbless body like Arty’s. Arturan creed claims that lessening the materiality of the body alleviates its psychological pain and shame, thereby leading the Arturan follower to the metaphysical attainment of “Peace, Isolation and Purity” (Dunn 227). For the Arturan, when the body is no longer the means for love, self-worth can evolve. The maneuver of Arty’s messianic message is a counterpoint to Christ’s making whole, by healing, the incomplete bodies of the lame and the blind. Arty’s miracle cure, unlike Christ’s remedy for the severely disabled, is “corrective surgery” for the severely normal: the amputation of arms and legs (Dunn 231).

However, the Binewski family’s entrepreneurial achievement is not without the tension of a vicious, and sometimes murderous, sibling rivalry that ultimately implodes in the family and thereby destroys the carnival. “The real trouble, as usual, was Arty. He’d always been jealous. He didn’t mind me so much because money was the gauge of his envy and I didn’t make any. The twin, however, drove him wild” (Dunn 74). Arty has a murderous attitude toward his siblings that resembles Cain’s toward Abel. In fact, Arty murders two siblings, Leona and

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<sup>11</sup> Webster’s Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary

Apple; tries to murder Chick; lobotomizes Electra; and forces Oly to give Miranda, who is Arty's and Oly's daughter, up for adoption. As with Cain, greed and envy motivate Arty.

Arty claims his place in the family's pecking order by announcing to Oly, "I'm the oldest, the son, the *Binewski*! This whole show is mine, the whole family. Papa was the oldest and he got the show and Grandpa's ashes. [...]. When Papa goes it'll be me" (Dunn103).

However, aside from the Judeo-Christian tradition of patriarchal lineage where the first-born male child inherits the power and material wealth of the father, there's another competing factor involved in the Binewski hierarchy: freak status. Arty outlines the order, "The twins are true freaks. Chick is a miracle. Me? I'm just an industrial accident!" (Dunn 103)

The twins' success due to their high-aggrandized packaging has already been discussed: their abnormality is understated, and their glamour is accentuated. And, Chick has fantastic telekinetic powers that could reap in a fortune for the family, via pick pocketing, and mental rigging of gambling games; but Arty sabotages these schemes because Chick could potentially supplant Arty's top rank position. When Al discovers Chick's telekinetic ability, he gushes proudly to Lil, "He's the finest thing we've done!" (Dunn 71) Arty, on the other hand, has a physique that if pathologized would send him into an institutional warehouse.<sup>12</sup> Characteristic of his acute understanding of the marginalization of the disabled body in society, Arty quips, "You know what they do with people like me? Brick walls, six-bed wards, two diapers a day and a visit from a mothball Santa at Christmas!" (Dunn 103)

And so Arty says he has to create an incredibly inventive persona to stay afloat in the freak show business; thus, he articulates the stage persona as a half-fish/half-human oracle that

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<sup>12</sup> "Disability historian Paul Longmore explains that the first widely held view of physical disability is the 'moral mode;' that is, society believed that disablement was a 'deviance,' cause by a lack of moral character or intervening supernatural forces, in any case, dangerous to society. The next historical view is the medical mode—that disability is biological by nature but must be controlled by curing the 'defects'—and resulted in medical and paternalistic social intervention such as sterilization, segregation, and institutionalization" (Russell 97).

later evolves into his messianic character. Like Arty, Oly also realizes that her parents “achieved greater originality with some of their other projects” than they did with her. (Dunn 321) Oly’s corporeality as a bald, albino, hunchbacked, dwarf were considered “commonplace” in the Binewski schematic (Dunn 8). Olympia is taught to develop the eccentric demeanor of a midway “shill and talker for the business”; her combination of congenital expression “increased her value” (Dunn 8). However, Olympia’s body, even when equipped with exotic sunglasses, could not muster the same drawing power that Arty and the twins could command.

Robert Bogdan’s description of the difference of social status between a midget and a dwarf in the world of the sideshow elucidates the historically low social position for dwarves:

The terms *midget* and *dwarf* had important social meaning in the amusement world. Small people who were well proportioned—‘perfect humans in miniature’—in particular coveted the term midget for themselves as a way of disaffiliating from the more physically deformed ‘dwarf’ exhibits [...]. For midgets who were typically cast in the high aggrandized mode, to be called a ‘dwarf’ was like being called a ‘child’: it was an insult. ‘Dwarfs’ were associated with exotic freak or circus clown roles, and these roles ‘midgets’ shunned.  
(Bogdan 175)

Oly is not the proportioned “miniature” of an average adult. Her self-awareness of her big hands and feet at the end of short skinny arms and legs indicates that she meets the criteria of being a veritable dwarf. (Dunn 20, 326) And, her one crack at performance occurs later in life under involuntary seedy circumstances at a sex club where her ability to flaunt, and to out freak the other performers, is also accompanied by shame and meager remuneration. (Dunn 20-1) But, however minimal Olympia’s potential is in the Binewski business, Arty, in classic sibling rivalry, finds it necessary to exaggerate young Olympia’s unimportance.

Then he would threaten me with the “institution,” which was the place that I would be sent to if I didn’t shape up. “No matter how generous and kind Papa and Lil are—they wouldn’t have any choice,” he would say. His sympathy and understanding washed around me with razors caught in the flow. Arty’s depiction of the “institution” scared me more than death or snakes. The institution was a

cross between an orphanage and a slaughterhouse. Worst of all, it was run entirely by norms. The word alone sent my chin trembling. I would beg and grieve and he would allow that I deserved another chance. (Dunn 75-6)

Olympia is privy to Arty's ambition and familial power where his abilities and limits are unpredictable. She has every right to be scared of the possibility of being institutionalized. Her marginalization within the carnival industry, within her family, as well as the heightening of it by Arty, is also reflected within society at large. Drunks can accost her on the midway. She and her siblings are shot in a shopping center parking lot. The physicians at the emergency room alternate between revulsion and undue curiosity; they want to keep her and her siblings for further observation. (Dunn 61-2)

Furthermore, regardless of Arty's intent to frighten his sister, his description of institutions for people with disabilities as a hybrid of "orphanage and slaughter house" was reality in the holocaust.<sup>13</sup> Instigated by patriotic German physicians who were frustrated at their inability to cure patients with chronic symptoms, authorized "mercy deaths" evolved into the full fledged killing program dubbed Aktion T-4 leaving more than 200,000 German citizens who

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<sup>13</sup> Huge Gallagher argues that 50 years of Social Darwinian eugenic discourse by the American and European "medical profession, scientific community, and the intelligentsia generally," seeped into Germany's medical ethical stance. (Gallagher 4-6, 95) Gallagher suggests that it could have happened anywhere give the right set of circumstances. (Gallagher 4-6) Indeed, distinguished U.S. physicians have recommended extermination of disabled people. For example, a July 1942 editorial in the American Journal of Psychiatry enthusiastically extols an article by Foster Kennedy. (Gallagher) Kennedy suggests that when a "defective product" a "mistake of nature" turns five, "the parents or guardians should be allowed to ask a panel of doctors that the child 'be relieved of the burden of living'" (Shapiro 272). The editors recommended public relation strategies as well as educational methods for families who resist such treatments. (Gallagher 94) The result of campaigns financed by eugenicist dabblers like the DuPonts, the Fricks and the Harrimans, American institutional life was a punitive existence. (Gallagher 84) "By the year 1923, forty-three states operated institutions with an overall resident population of 43,000" people with physical and cognitive disabilities. Most were held without due process of law. (Gallagher 84-5) Real life disabled Americans from Olympia's era are described in the following observation: "Many formally institutionalized people with significant disabilities residing in the community lived in dread of being forced to return to institutions when their caretakers could no longer provide for them. Paralyzed by polio at ten years of age, Bernice White [...] prepared a lethal dose of pills in the late 50s to ensure that she would die before she would be institutionalized again" (Fleischer and Zames 34). As recently as 1972, "a Florida state representative, who was also a doctor, introduced a 'death with dignity' bill, he suggested that some 1,500 people, 90 percent of the total, 'might qualify for elimination'" (Shapiro 273). During the 70s and 80s, "Death as Management" options via the starvation of disabled newborns abound in publications such as The New England Journal of Medicine, Pediatrics, and The Journal of Medical Ethics. (Gallagher 123-4)

were killed by their physicians in Hitler's Reich. (Gallagher 4-5) The patients families were charged for the expense of the various "medical therapies" (which consisted of pills, starvation, carbon monoxide gas, syringes, and the occasional bullet) in the death program, but were told that their loved ones died of influenza, pneumonia and other infections. (Gallagher 98, 105, 114, 134) Many of the bodies were later used for medical research. However, most of the bodies were taken either by conveyer belt from the gas chamber to the crematorium or the portable furnace was brought to it. (Gallagher 104)

These gas chambers, said to be the most "humane" form of treatment, and furnaces were later shipped for use at the concentration camps in Poland. (Gallagher 99, 104) However, the original German killing centers were institutions such as asylums, orphanages, abbeys, hospitals and prisons. (Gallagher) During the early 1940s, institutionalized children all over Germany, regardless of health were starved to death, encased in overheated rooms to die of heat stroke, or exposed to other forms of intentional neglect to facilitate their deaths. (Gallagher 135-6) However, the official killing program sanctioned at least 5,000 deaths. But thousands of more occurred for having perceived disabilities including, but not limited to, dwarfism, deformity, deafness, blindness, epilepsy, palsey, Down's syndrome, idiocy as well as for asocial infractions such as bedwetting, pimples, mouthing off to nurses. (Gallagher 128, 135)

The title for the Geek Love chapter where Arty threatens to institutionalize Olympia links the novel directly with the gas chambers of the holocaust. Futhermore, "Green—as in Arsenic, Tanished Spoons, and Gas-Chamber Doors" situates Arty's maniacal behavior as being on par with Hitler whose concern in Mein Kampf over the weakening state of Germany's Aryan gene pool is renown. Not only does Arty, like Hitler, emphasize to Olympia that the Binewski family doesn't keep offspring who don't make the genetic grade, he devises a plan to fabricate a new

master race. Antithetical to Hitler's "demented drive for perfect health, perfect bodies and perfect happiness," Arty develops a cult following who crave the amputated body for the pursuit of Peace, Isolation and Purity. (Gallagher 4) Like Hitler, Arty utilizes a physician, Dr. Phyllis to promote the medical expertise for this enterprise.

In turn, Dr. Phyllis exhibits impatience similar to the Reich's medical profession who sought more efficient means to the goal of the pure race. Just as the Reich's medical profession got antsy with the slow and laborious process of purifying the German populace by enforcing sterilization upon those deemed reproductively undesirable, Dr. Phyllis quickly tires of the molasses-paced series of incremental surgical removal of body parts lobbies for a swift one-step surgical approach.

Arty educates Olympia to the social disenfranchisement of the disabled body by giving her a lesson on the representation of the disabled body in literature. Again, the lesson reinforces the reason why Olympia should be wary of nondisabled people's misperceptions of the disabled body. When Olympia queries Arty as to whether his bedtime readings of horror and ghost stories induce nightmares, he says that he doesn't get afraid because they're about people like him and his siblings:

These books are written by norms to scare norms. And do you know what the monsters and demons and rancid spirits are? Us, that's what. You and me. We are the things that come to norms in nightmares. The thing that lurks in the bell tower and bites out the throats of the choirboys—that's you, Oly. And the thing in the closet that makes the babies scream in the dark before it sucks their last breath—that's me. And the rustling in the bush and the strange piping cries that chill the spine on a deserted road at twilight—that's the twins singing practice scales while they look for berries. (Dunn 14)

Arty concludes his lesson by asserting that he learns a great deal from this kind of literature.

Presumably he means to capitalize on the expressive power that the spectacularized body can

wield. Showman Al teaches a similar lesson to his children, “Always remember [...] how much leverage you’ve got on the norms just in your physical presence” (Dunn 151).

Rosemarie Garland Thomson, literary theorist in disability representation, echoes Arty and Al’s arguments:

Consider, for instance, the semantic distinctions applied to anomalous bodies over time. Never simply itself, the exceptional body betokens something else, becomes revelatory, sustains narrative, exists socially in a realm of hyper-representation. Indeed, the word *monster*—perhaps the earliest and most enduring name for the singular body—derives from the Latin *monstra*, meaning to warn, show, or sign, and which has given us the modern verb *demonstration*” (Garland Thompson 3).

Olympia remembers her brother and father’s insights later in life when she worms her way into Mary Lick’s world. She uses her body as stagecraft in order to play off of Miss Lick’s reaction to the disabled body. As Olympia appraises all of the unique features of her body she worries “if it will work this time when [she] need[s] it to. After all, Miss Lick is not a norm and for all [Olympia] know[s] she is immune to the usual tricks” (Dunn 151). Not to worry, Miss Lick reveals her lack of “immunity” from the git-go with “the standard civilized greeting, ignoring the obvious” (Dunn151).

Meanwhile, Arty manages to gain full control of the Binewski Carnival Fabulon. His Arturan cult mushrooms while Lillian succumbs to the side affects from her years of drug use, Al turns to the bottle after his failure in his schemes regarding Chick, and Arty easily intervenes in the twins’ attempts at independence. Ironically he transforms the Binewski Carnival Fabulon into an approximation of concentration camp existence. The institutionalization that so scared Olympia becomes a reality under Arty’s tenure as Binewski patriarch. Ultimately Arty’s diabolical plots hurt his siblings with such extremity that the family disintegrates. Some Binewski family members quite literally go up in a mushroom cloud. However, Lil and Olympia

survive the holocaust, whereas Olympia's daughter had the good fortune of being exiled from the family before its downfall.

The second plot in Geek Love, requires Olympia to reveal to her daughter Miranda, the rich, yet difficult, legacy from which she comes. Olympia is thrown into a crisis of identity when, yet again, another person, this time her name is Miss Lick, in Miranda's life wants to "help" Miranda to get rid of her tail. For Olympia, it is precisely this rare genetic expression that marks Miranda as a Binewski. Miss Lick emerges at first like a reincarnation of Arty. She has power, and she wants to remodify people's bodies: specifically women's bodies. She takes issue with the way that women's bodies are excessively sexually objectified to the point that they lose the opportunity to reach their mental potential. Miss Lick wants to intervene with women's sexual appeal so that they can live a life of the mind. So rather than castrating men's genitals, she opts to amputate breasts, erase faces and to sew up vaginas. Miss Lick views femininity as a birth defect: especially when it's commodified.

Miss Lick considers herself an Arturan-esque missionary. (Dunn 160) Her zealotry is too much for Olympia's sensibilities, especially since Miss Lick's desire to convert Miranda would strip Miranda of her ethnicity—if ethnicity here can be taken to stand for a family trait that has cultural meaning. Also, there is much about Miss Lick's human experience that Olympia appreciates. As Olympia sets out to sabotage Miss Lick, she authentically befriends her. In fact, Miss Lick is Olympia's first friend. Miranda never wants to hurt Miss Lick, but she believes there's no other way that she can stop Miss Lick's mission.

Olympia needs Miranda to have a clear understanding of the genealogical forces that shape her daughter's body and mind before Miranda succumbs to Miss Lick's maternal charm. Miranda is sorely tempted to take Miss Lick up on her offer, "[...] I felt right then and there that

I'd give her my tail or anything else she asked for just because she cared" (Dunn 35).

Meanwhile, Olympia is so smitten with Binewski-style maternal love for her daughter, who favors Arty's looks, that she's willing to "whittle away [her] fingers and toes" like and Arturan, if only it would make [Miranda's] long Binewski eyes light [with joy] forever" (Dunn 26). The complicating factor for Olympia is her fear that Miranda will reject her as a mother, "As for Miranda, I can't be sure what it would do to her to know her real mother. I imagine her bright spine cringing and slumping and staying that way. She makes a gallant orphan" (Dunn 12). But Miranda is not an orphan.

Miranda is a Binewski through and through. She has almond eyes, forehead, cheekbones, and mouth of her father (and uncle) Arty, as well as his murderous streak. "One of my teachers says I draw like a mass murderer. I hate that ditsy crap, though. Inchy little lines like the hesitation cuts on a suicide's wrist" (Dunn 25). Her orphan last name, Barker, is a namesake for her mother's profession and she turns on the spiel when she must.<sup>14</sup> Anxious to persuade Olympia to model for her upcoming anatomy illustration competition, Miranda tries to shill Olympia with invitations to tea or lunch. When Miranda shows up at Olympia's workplace, ostensibly to take her out to lunch, the midday sidewalk turns into a midway sideshow for Olympia. Drivers in autos are suddenly customers. Miranda turns into a carnival barker:

Her sweet-gimp guise is gone. She is green fire above Binewski cheekbones. She means to convince me. [...] She is burning away at me, *talking fast* [italics mine], her eyes demanding. [...] 'I've got to rock them. I've got to yank their hearts out.' (Dunn 24-5)

In a manner of speaking, Miranda has taken up the family business. The medical field has a symbiotic relationship with the freak show business. Whereas freak shows use pseudo medical terminology, the medical world displays exhibitions of the disabled body. Both

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<sup>14</sup> A carnival freak show barker is a fast talking person whose "job was to attract the crowd, to grab attention with [her] modulating voice and slick talk" (Bogden 94).

enterprises exist for profit. The freak show also exists for “amusement.” The medical profession would call its purpose scientific curiosity. In both cases, the disabled body is turned into a curio. Miranda, the budding medical illustrator, has an art portfolio that contains a sundry sideshow attractions or medical studies, depending on one’s point of view. It contains the mummy-without a face/dissection of a corpse’s craniofacial muscular anatomy, the fat man/male morbid obesity, and the strong man/steroid abuser. The portfolio is lacking a bald, albino, dwarf, hunchback woman freak.

Medical displays of the disabled body have often been compared with the spectacle exhibitions of freaks. For instance, in Scene Two of P.H.\*reaks: The Hiddent History of People with Disabilites, a medical examination is conflated with freak show archetypes (i.e. “The Talker” from Scene One is now a colleague of the attending physician). An attending physician strips a young woman patient ostensibly to get an unobscured view. However, the reality is that the physician objectifies the young woman into a medical condition; the young woman becomes a case, her personhood is neglected. The physician completes her inspection, “Good. Now, I’m just going to ask in a few of my colleagues to observe here” (Baizley and Ann-Lewis 314). The Hilton sisters, who were conjoined twins had this to say about the medical profession: we “loathed the very tone of the medical man’s voice ‘and feared that’ Auntie ‘would’ stop showing us on stage and let the doctors have us – to punch and pinch and take our pictures always” (qtd. in Bogdan 173).

Miranda’s goal of becoming a medical illustrator can be traced as a family occupational tradition to her uncle Chick’s success as a surgeon for the Arturans and to her grandfather Al’s medical ministrations for the carnival personnel as well as for Binewski family members. Miranda’s full head of hair and long legs emulate those of her Grandmother Lil’s. Miranda’s tail

can be a genetic tribute to her Aunt Leona, ‘the alligator girl’. Finally, in the tradition of her twin Aunts’, Iphigenia and Electra, stint at exoticizing and prostituting their conjoined body, Miranda exhibits the sexual allure of her body at a sex club that specializes in displaying anomalous body types. In any case, Miranda exudes a bit of the Binewski stage presence.

Olympia can’t help to wonder if Miranda has genetic codes that contribute to her behavior. Is there “some hooked structure in her cells that twists her toward all that the world calls freakish”? (Dunn 15). Or, perhaps there’s “some pulse in her bones, some twist in her genetic coil,” that leans her toward Olympia “in a blind craving” (Dunn 25). Maybe, according to Olympia, “something” in Miranda’s “blood aches, warning her” that there is value in her tail. (Dunn 40) At the very least, what is the inherent imaginative quality that motivates Miranda to sketch, with what stands for Binewski sentimentality, an image that indicates a vague understanding of family history? The image could be her Grandmother Lillian when she was a young geek:

Her drawing was suddenly in front of me, framed and glassed on the grey wall beside the sink. The darkness is in and the eyes and teeth come out of the dark and the screaming chicken is bulging vainly away, caught as the teeth close tearing into exploding feathers and black blood behind its desperate skull. Drawn with a bullwhip at thirty paces. Quietly, in the white at the bottom, her penciled hand has scrawled “Geek Love – by M. Barker.” (Dunn 29)

Olympia’s fear that Miranda’s straight back could crush into a hunchback under the heavy weight of knowing her Binewski family history is a curious remaking of the medieval belief that “curled inside a hunchback’s burden” are the “darknesses” [sic] of demonic deformations of sin. (Baizley and Ann-Lewis 306) Olympia’s family story is certainly potent with powerfully tragic characters whose wild ambitions approximate the morally ambiguous

gods in Greek Mythology with whom even Socrates took issue.<sup>15</sup> For instance, in Geek Love produces a family that produces legacies that become the antithesis of the American Dream as with mythological Greek love. In both Geek Love and Greek love Iphigenia and Electra, daughters of Al and Lil and Agamemnon and Clytemnestra are caught in plots of revenge, and obsession where relatives are sacrificed, hunted and murdered. The title Geek Love of course twists on the slang “Greek love” which means anal intercourse and possibly pederasty. The OED calls it “unnatural.” The negative ambience evoked by the Judeo-Christian condemnation of this kind of sexuality overflows onto the sexuality of the disabled body. The sexuality of the disabled body will be explored later, but it’s generally linked to “aesthetic anxiety” over teratogeny. (Russell 48)

Olympia, witness and participant of Geek Love’s great passions, has a name that is signified in Mount Olympus’, a place that too must shoulder the animosities and loves of its Greek gods and heroes. Olympia’s hunchback can serve as a “hyper-representation” of the type of faith practiced by the ancient Greeks who had to endure the rapacious quaking of Mount Olympus’ morally capricious Gods: “her mystic breastbone has spent thirty-eight years trying to increase its distance from her agnostic spine” (Dunn 344).

Most likely, Olympia thinks Miranda is fortunate not to have inherited Olympia’s physique. Olympia’s hunchback, bald, albino, three-foot-dwarf corporeal particulars were not exotic enough to be a big money maker for the Binewskis. Her father Al makes clear Olympia’s shortcomings as he trains her to become a Barker for her siblings:

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<sup>15</sup> Plato ascribes the following didactic to Socrates: “Nor will we allow our people to believe that Achilles, who was the son of a goddess and of Peleus (the most moderate of men and the grandson of Zeus ) [...] was so full of inner turmoil as to have two diseases in his soul—slavishness accompanied by the love of money, on the one hand, and arrogance towards gods and humans, on the other. [...] We certainly won’t [...] allow it to be said that Theseus, the son of Poseidon, and Peirithous, the son of Zeus, engaged in terrible kidnappings, or that any other hero or son of a god dared to do any of the terrible and impious deeds that they are now falsely said to have done. [...] For that reason we must stop such stories, lest they produce in the youth inclinations to do bad things” (Plato 67-8).

“Move your lips, for shit’s sake!” howled Papa, or “Stop with the mouse farts and *project!*”

“That’s a double-reed instrument! It is called a voice! It is not a comb wrapped in waxed paper! I gave it to you from the love in guts for your scrawny and unmarketable carcass, so be kind enough to use it properly!” (Dunn 45)

Nor are her corporeal particulars valued in her post-carnival life::

Then he turns and sees me, humping along and looking directly into his eyes. The double image scars him. My mother, on the street alone, can be written off with the gentle oddities of rambling mumblers, drunk, and beggars, but when I come twenty feet behind, there is an ice moment. Even the smug feel it. They go home and tell their wives that the streets of Portland are filled with weirdos. Their dreams weave a bent linkage between the wild old woman and the hunchbacked dwarf. Or they think we are residents of an institutional halfway house, or that the circus is in town. (Dunn 14)

In order to achieve social agency Olympia hides her body with prosthetics. Olympia’s body is located under a wig with her albino eyes wrapped in tinted glasses while seated behind the radio microphones, or on the other end of the telephone: “I can never be inconspicuous in person. A hunchback is not agile enough for efficient skulking. But my voice can take me anywhere. I can be a manicured silk receptionist, a bureaucrat of impenetrable authority, or an old college chum named Beth” (Dunn 150). In person at the swimming pool Olympia is a spectacle, perhaps even a leviathan awash in a tide pool:

[...] four little girls are huddled in the water on the other side of the pool, swearing to each other in whisper that they have seen me in the dressing room without my swim cap and my green-tinted goggles. They are assuring each other that I am as bald as a baby’s ass and that my eyes are bright red.

[...] The children’s eyes are crawling on me. If I opened my eyes they would smile and wave. They are just old enough to be embarrassed at their normality in front of me. (Dunn 325)

However, it is Olympia’s skill as a barker that qualifies her to be the narrative voice of her family story. As a barker, Olympia grew up disseminating the hyperbolized family story to the carnival goers, “From the darkest mysteries of science, a revelation of poetic grace” (Dunn 45). Her low rung position on the family’s hierarchy also permitted a childhood as an observant

bystander intelligencer. And, as exemplified earlier, her hunchback physique offers symbolic interpretation to her functions as narrator and Barker. Olympia's hunchback ostensibly holds her family's secrets.

Exploring the creation of the Jewish folkloric Lilith. In *The Book of Lilith*, Barbara Black Kottus includes a photo image of a late 15<sup>th</sup> century Finnish statue of the Virgin breastfeeding the child Christ. (Kottus 70) Carved into the base of the Virgin and child statue is Lilith with the body of a serpent, wearing Eve who is naked and laying on her belly seductively eating the apple. The Virgin and child pose is reminiscent of Eve holding her son Horus at her breast. Lilith in relation to Lil will be discussed later. But for now, the interferences of the Lilith Mother archetype of the same-named Lilith's body in the Garden of Eden as the source of all generations.

Therefore, Lil's son, Arty's, serpent physique is a logical genetic expression of the Lilith of Genesis. In fact, Arty demonstrates an early identification with Lilith's infested reputation as a demon that attacks children. "Remember his critique of Lycor's failure, "And the thing in the closet that makes the babies scream in the dark before it sucks their last breath—the 'it' that I said so." Additionally, Lil's grief over the death of her daughter Lycor—the Liard-Girl—suggests a maternal pride of a daughter who resembles the best of the family genes. "I'd never linger over the jar and once or twice I saw her cry as she peered her forehead against the glass and crossed, "Wished with hope for her, she would fight" (Dora 34). Furthermore, the notice of Lilith, the serpent, as part of the Human Genome would give credence to the site of the shrine room where Lewis and her other dead siblings are displayed. Sped by Lil's showcased medical religious relic and "carefully catalogued in brown letters on a tan background, "the signals "HUMAN, BORN OF SERPENT, WARRIOR" (Dora 34). For a Call-It family being born

### 3. TERATOGENESIS

Al and Lillian as the progenitors of a biblical teratogenesis are better understood by examining the invocation of the Jewish folkloric Lilith. In The Book of Lilith, Barbara Black Koltuv includes a photo image of a late 15<sup>th</sup> century Flemish statue of the Virgin breastfeeding the child Christ. (Koltuv70) Carved into the base of the Virgin and child statue is Lilith with the body of a serpent watching Eve who is naked and laying on her belly sinfully eating the apple. The Virgin and child pose is reminiscent of Isis holding her son Horace at her breast. Isis in relation to Lil will be discussed later. But for now, the inferences of the Great Mother archetypes of the statue suggest Lilith's body in the Garden of Eden as the source of all generations.

Therefore, Lil's son, Arty's, serpent physique is a logical genetic expression of the Lilith of Genesis. In fact, Arty demonstrates an early identification with Lilith's fabled reputation as a demon that attacks children.<sup>16</sup> Remember his critique of horror fiction: "And the thing in the closet that makes the babies scream in the dark before it sucks their last breath—that's me" (Dunn 46). Additionally, Lil's grief over the death of her daughter Leona-the-Lizard-Girl suggests a matrilineal pride of a daughter who resembles the best of the family genes. "Lil would linger over the jar and once or twice I saw her cry as she pressed her forehead against the glass and crooned, 'We had such hopes for her,' she would sigh" (Dunn 54). Furthermore, the notion of Lilith, the serpent, as part of the Human Genome would give credence to the sign in the shrine room where Leona and her other dead siblings are displayed. Spot lit like a showcased medieval religious relic and "carefully calligraphed in brown letters on a cream background," the sign reads 'HUMAN. BORN OF NORMAL PARENTS' (Dunn 54). For a Catholic family, being born

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<sup>16</sup> Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary

with original sin is a normal part of being human; the Catholic Binewskis desire for special children unconsciously ties in a biblically induced genetic heritage of Lilith's body.

Lillian's and Miranda's massive amount of blond hair that continuously "amazes and awes" Oly represents the more typical representation of Lilith. However, Oly's and Arty's baldness is a further indication of the Lilith gene as revealed in a different Lilith image in the Koltuv book. The image depicts what Koltuv describes as "an unusually bald Lilith" (106). Hugo van der Goes' portrayal of Lilith in his painting The Fall of Adam shows a conniving serpent-bodied Lilith who is shilling Adam and Eve much like Arty manipulates Al and Lil. In the following scene, Arty prompts Al with a way to abandon the newly born Chick.

The morning before, while the plans were still forming, Al had checked out the van. Arty crawled underneath and talked to all while he cranked the wrenches around. [...] Later, at the breakfast table, Al told it as though it had occurred to him without outside help.

"We could go into a big supermarket and wait in an aisle, until there was no one else in sight and push the cans of beans aside [...] and lay him on the shelf at the back and then stack the cans in front of him again and walk away. [...]"

Then Al remembered the surveillance cameras and other security hardware and discarded the idea. But I knew it had come from Arty originally. It smacked of him. (Dunn 66-7)

In the Old Testament and in the Zohar, leviathan, serpents, spirits and demons that are "half the class of human beings below and half the class of angels above" abound. (qtd. in Koltuv 7)<sup>17</sup> "And every living creature that creepeth. This is the soul of the creature which creeps to the four quarters of the globe, to wit, Lilith" (qtd. in Koltuv 8). Lilith's wide-ranging presence lends new meaning to the several exclamations of "creeping Jesus" and "creeping Christ" in Geek Love. Likewise, Lilith energy lurks when the "delicate mucous linings of the amphibious Miss Oly" can be disheartened. (Dunn 329) Oly with her pink eyes scuttles rat-like

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<sup>17</sup> Zohar is a "medieval mystical work, consisting chiefly of interpretations of and commentaries [...] the definitive work of Jewish cabala.

on short legs, and is even more rat-like by sleeping beneath kitchen sinks all her life on “nests” of blankets.

Very early in this paper I refer to Simi Linton’s take on Rosemarie Garland Thomson’s use of the word “normate” as a way to mark the unacknowledged cultural centering of an ideal body. Linton argues that “by meeting *normal* on some of its own terms, *normate* inflects its root, and challenges the validity, indeed the possibility of normal. At the same time, its ironic twist gives a more flavorful reading of the idea of normal” (Linton 24-5). I argue that the Binewski family’s proclivity for using the word “norm” holds the same function as Thomson and Linton’s interpretation of the neologism “normate.” In Geek Love normate physique is accentuated in scrutinizing sentences such as Olympia’s amazement at her daughter’s six foot tall frame, “She is huge. [...] The wild hair torching out of the edges of her face mesmerizes me. The millions of hairs in a dozen of smoldering tones are as alien as her size, the outrageous length of her” (Dunn 28). Another example of normate construction exclaims, “The hands shot up—all five fingers spread to show their service status” (Dunn 275). The “fingerful” and “toeful” novice Arturans want to provide attendant services to the “elevated man”—a post-operative amputated Arturan.

Dunn’s choice to pepper Geek Love with the slang “norm” for the nondisabled body is also a convenient symmetrical rhyme to its counterpart “worm” which in Geek Love displaces the normate from the cultural center with the disabled body. Arty, with his Lilith-like body, is the model of wormalcy which the norms covet. Even the CPA norm that investigative reporter Norval Sanderson observes at an Arturan revival meeting is mesmerized by Arturo—The Aqua Man:

A man who had to be a Certified Public Accountant on my left—a big self-contained man in a decent suit and well-groomed beard. The wedding ring glinted on his fingers as his hands gripped his knees. He didn’t shout when the others did. He was silent, focused on the tank and the venomous worm in it.

During the “As I am” chorus he was frozen so rigidly that I glanced at his face. He was biting his lip and staring, unblinking at the pale squirming thin down there in the green-lit water. He didn’t move. But when I looked again, a trickle of blood was slipping down his chin into his beard and his lower lip was still caught in his teeth. There was a wailing grandmother on my right, wailing and whomping throughout. Her easy tears didn’t touch me at all. It was this thick-wallet with his gleaming, well-kept air who shook me up. (Dunn191)

The skepticism of normalcy is established early on in Geek Love when Miranda quizzes Olympia, “You must have wished a million times to be normal” (Dunn 34). Whereby Olympia responds with an emphatic no, “I’ve wished I had two heads. Or that I was invisible. I’ve wished for a fish’s tail instead of legs. I’ve wished to be more special” (Dunn 34).

When Norval Sanderson calls Arty a “Transcendental Maggot,” Arty retorts, that yes, he is indeed the “Transcendental Maggot” because he has “the power to thrive in the decaying frenzy of the planet” (Dunn 189). Although Arty is just doing a public relations spin, the image of decay is brought about frequently in Geek Love mostly in the form of green moss, mold, mildew and slime. Combined with the pervasive images of amphibious creatures of tadpoles, snakes, crocodiles and reptiles, a swampy backdrop flows throughout the novel. Animalian behaviors include clucking, barking, squawking, roaring, chirping, yelping. Arty’s watery existence evokes intimacy with the origins of life as his “round wide head does a snake dance” (Dunn 77). From out of the bloody darkness between Olympia’s legs emerges newly born Miranda’s whose “small rumped face jerk[s] to the side with a profile like a turtle” (Dunn 33). Miranda as a fetus is “the tiny frog babe” (Dunn 303). “Frog-faced” Olympia skirts “the slimed pool of water that fills the center of the roof” (Dunn 328). She must watch her step on the fire escape ladder lest she slip and “drop and crack like a beetle on the garage roof, next to the ornamental pool” (Dunn 329).

Olympia's ultimate animal form, however, is the Dragon, which can be mythological and satanic, or a huge serpent or crocodile, or a fierce violent person, or a very watchful strict woman. Olympia as dragon suggests another image of Lilith. Moreover, when Olympia calls herself as "the bald-headed mother of morons" she is announcing herself as the Great Mother, albeit one who is having a bad day. She is the one who appreciates the regenerative value of moldy living quarters, "In my home the air reeks of dust and jumbled layers of life, and it is dim unless you are next to a window" (Dunn 331). New "tinhorn" buildings seem "lifeless, and incapable of decay" to Olympia the Dragon. (Dunn 331) As the watcher, she is the one who has seeks to decipher the sexual and reproductive mysteries of her people.

She watches her mother and older sisters' dawning consciousnesses at the twins first blood which neither mother nor daughters could predict for certain would ever happen. Appropriately in a dark overturned reeking portable latrine, the Binewski women huddle like rodents in the dark after a sandstorm of biblical proportions attacks the carnival village as if heralding the momentous occasion of the twins' menstrual rite of passage. Olympia wonders about her own reproductive potential, "Mama, will it happen to me?" (Dunn 137) Later she muses about the sexuality of her siblings, "the mysterious acts of [her] people" (Dunn 240). "Children stumble through these most critical acts with no real help from the elders who are so anxious to teach them everything else" (Dunn 240)

The Binewski parents taught their children the performance of seduction for show business purposes with the ethos to leave the crowds wanting more. Or, as Olympia puts it, "disappear in the instance of climax" (Dunn 240). Arty, with the help of an electrician inventor, even rigs his audiences' bleachers to buzz his voice through his disciples' bodies like a vibrating sexual accoutrement. She knows that her brother Arty "fucks around" with female normates, and

that her sisters sell their sexuality as high-priced prostitutes. Even death is not a mystery for Olympia to the degree that sexuality is to her:

But this real mystery I have never touched, never scratched. I've seen the tigers with their jaws wide, their fangs buried in each other's throats, and their shadowed hides sizzling, tip to tip. I've seen young norms tangled and gasping in the shadows between booths. (Dunn 141)

However, Olympia conflates her disabled body with the function of sexual longing:

I suspect that, even if I had begun as a norm, the saw-toothed yearning that whirls in me would bend me and spin me colorless, shrink me, scorch every hair from my body, and all invisibly so only my red eyes would blink out glimpses of the furnace inside. In fact, I smell the stench of longing so clearly in the streets that I'm surprised there are not hundreds exactly like me on every corner. (Dunn 241)

Olympia's connection of her disabled body as the manifestation of desire necessarily suggests the regenerative capabilities of the Lilith body. Furthermore, Olympia's incestuous design on her brother cinches a biodeterminist view of sexuality as a reproductive act. Her intense competition with her sister Iphigenia to jockey for their brother as a mate parodies Darwinian theory. Olympia's body wins over her sister and over the female normates. And, in social Darwinian fashion of selective breeding, Olympia's conception is achieved via artificial insemination.

Olympia the Lilith dragon, "the adolescent crone sitting in the ruins, watch[es] the beams [of her family's light] crumble, and warm[s] herself in the smoke from the funeral pyre"—due to her brother's Thanatos agenda. But her brother's sperm was her only regenerative hope: few suitable mates such as dwarves or midgets passed through the carnival. When it became apparent that Vinnie, the long-legged hunchback Pin Kid wasn't interested in her, Olympia experiences an epiphany about love and sex and the marginalization of her disabled body:

That's when it clicked that the mechanics of my life were not going to run on the physics that ruled the twins or Mama in her day. If I bled it didn't mean

what Iphy's blood meant. If I loved it wasn't the same as Iphy's love or the love of bouncy girls in the midway.

Arty had done his best to teach me this all along but I had seen him as a special case, not governed by prosy gravity that held the rest of us. Vinnie, the Pin Kid, tried to keep me from knowing that he'd never thought of me the way I had thought of him. His kindness scalded me awake.

[...] He moved as though he were all legs, a smooth bobbing in his gait that poured in through my eyes and settled in my right lung like a pool of ice. I got up while his back was turned and crept away. (Dunn 288)

However, Olympia's a Binewski trouper who knows how to get what she wants. Weeks later she decides to enhance her possibilities for love by getting her younger brother Chick to clandestinely transfer Arty's sperm into her ovaries. Chick practices his mental skill at artificial insemination on Lilith the tiger who won't mate willingly. He then successfully impregnates with Arty's sperm. Olympia thus becomes the current teratogenitor of the Binewski family genes.

Her teratogeny, Miranda, is the next in line of who is capable of continuing the Binewski family bloodline. This is the scenario around which Geek Love revolves. Like the planets that circumnavigate the earth in Ptolemaic astronomy, the forces of wormalcy and normalcy swing their arcs around Miranda Barker Binewski's reproductive organs, and her tail. Olympia has mixed feelings of pride and bemusement by the male normates' attraction to her daughter:

they thought she was pretty [...] they thought it would be good to grab her ass and pump jizz into her. Their bodies lifted up, clean and simple to her in the clear, unconscious awareness of each of their cells sensing that she would grunt out strong young" (Dunn 17).

Via the Chapter Seven heading that presides over this description of her daughter's sexual appeal, once again, Olympia evokes Lilith's body by referring to her pride and joy, Miranda, as "The Joy of the Worm" (Dunn 11). The chapter title is an allusion to the theme of regeneration that is imbedded in Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra. The clown wishes Cleopatra "joy o'the

worm” as she prepares to commit suicide 5.2.270. It’s a sexual pun for orgasm, and it infers the penis. The clown delivers poisonous snakes to Cleopatra with which she intends to kill herself. In colloquial Elizabethan expression, “to die” also connotes orgasm. Cleopatra’s act of dying is rendered like a love scene. First the foreplay, “The stroke of death is as a lover’s pinch” (5.2.286). Then the ecstatic moan, “O Antony!” (5.2.303) Cleopatra disappears at climax as if she had the Binewski genius (or genes) for performance. She is going to meet her lover in the afterlife. Her death is a rebirth.

Antony lover’s name for Cleopatra, “Serpent of the Nile” (Antony and Cleopatra 1.5.25). And, according to Egyptian belief, Cleopatra, as Queen of Egypt, is a descendent of Isis who was born in the swamps of the Nile on the first day of creation. (Hassan 98, Monaghan 165) Therefore, Isis’ attributes are Cleopatra’s attributes. As a primordial goddess, Isis symbolizes the Great Mother. Her connection with the Nile accentuates her regenerative powers. Antony describes the Nile’s fertility:

The higher Nilus swells  
The more it promises; as it ebbs, the seedman  
Upon the slime and ooze scatters his grain,  
And shortly comes to harvest (Antony and Cleopatra 2.7.19-22)

Cleopatra’s relationship with Antony is interpreted as a reenactment of Isis’ relationship with her brother-lover Osiris. Their issuance is Horus. Olympia’s act of regeneration with her brother, combined with Geek Love’s worm and slime images, ties in neatly with Cleopatra and Isis’ “immortal longings” (Antony and Cleopatra 5.2.272). Once again Olympia’s inherent legitimacy as the progenitor of the Binewski lineage is reinforced. The royal Cleopatra lineage is also established with Lillian as Al’s Antony-like effusive account to the Binewski children, “She was magnificent, a princess, a Cleopatra, an elfin queen! That was your mother in the geek pit” (Dunn 6). Conversely, the calculating drama queen, Cleopatra would have fit in well in the

Binewski household, “Give me my robe. Put on my crown. I have // Immortal longings”

(Antony and Cleopatra 5.2.271-2).

Meanwhile Miranda is primed to be the next regenerative force. Her sketches of Olympia are a good beginning in reproducing the Binewski image. While Lil, the fading matriarch, struggles with her degenerate eyesight, Miranda’s vision is lock onto Olympia “the watcher, the mover, the maker[’s]” body. (Dunn 29) “Her eyes flick impatiently at me for a fast fix—a regenerative fusing of the image on her retina, the model she inflicts on the paper” (Dunn 30). Dunn’s lyrical nuance shines through for the millionth time with this portrayal of Miranda in her element donned perpetually in radioactive green garb, surrounded by delicacies of artichoke hearts, figs and grape leaves—comestibles that could have been plucked from Eden. It’s hard not to imagine Miranda, who seems to be in the process of uncovering her family genes, serving the actual vine leaves that Adam and Eve use to hide their genitals after “The Fall.” Miranda of course chooses a gorgonzola cheese, because Irish cheddar is incapable of invoking still another image of a monstrous serpentine repulsive mean ugly woman who Miranda is yet to call “Mom.”

Shakespeare’s The Tempest is the final literary genealogy I will introduce with regard to Geek Love. Olympia’s adult body looks a lot like Sycorax’s “foul witch” body that Prospero claims “with age and envy // Was grown into a hoop” (The Tempest 1.2.259-60). Sycorax, the mother of Caliban, and who could possibly be Miranda’s mother because her history is murky, never makes an appearance in The Tempest. Like Olympia’s eighteen year stint at being the invisible mother dragon overseer of her Miranda, Sycorax may be responsible for some of the “sounds, and sweet airs that give delight and hurt not” on her daughter and son’s lush Eden-like isle. (The Tempest (3.2.131). Meanwhile, the genealogical revelations that The Tempest’s fair

Miranda, whose goddess-like apparition force normate Ferdinand's cells to marvel at the possibility of her "grunt[ing] out strong young," undergoes is parodied in Geek Love's Miranda's brink of epiphany about her family tree. (The Tempest 1.2.425; Dunn 17) Miranda Barker Binewski's mannerisms and life "choices" that Olympia construes is "a wildness" that demonstrates "a triumph of her genes over indoctrination," indicates that she may utter the same passionate pleasure that The Tempest's Miranda pants upon the discovery of her ethnic roots:

O wonder!  
 How many goodly creatures are there here!  
 How beauteous mankind [my kind] is! O brave new world  
 That has such people in't! (The Tempest 5.1.184-187)

In addition to representations of The Tempest's Sycorax and Miranda in Geek Love, Prospero, Caliban and Ariel also have their Binewski counterparts in Al the Ringmaster, Arturo the Aqua Boy and Chick the mentalist respectively. Magic and illusion is the basis for both Prospero's and Al's gestalts. Caliban and Arty are both conscious of the effect that their fish bodies have on the narratives of their audiences. Whereas, Caliban asserts that he's a man, Arty asserts that he's a deity. In any case, both wormates are preoccupied with protecting their bodies from subjugation.

The Venetian aristocrats want to sell Caliban as a curiosity to their Renaissance court. The aristocrats scheme has historical accuracy. The freak show's origins are often traced to the Elizabethan Royal Society for scientific study and to the Bartholomew Fair for amusement. (Semonin 70). Indeed, specimens from the New World like the Calibanesque hybrid half-man, half-fish "sea monsters" were depicted on 17<sup>th</sup> century handbills. (Semonin 70) Similarly, as discussed earlier, Arty had to concoct an image that would amaze and awe. Otherwise, his act would have remained a paltry marginalized sideshow.

Finally, Geek Love's Chick has the personality of the fairy-boy Ariel. Both are "spirit[s] too delicate" that are bullied by maniacal plotters. Both are the talented workhorses of magic for their masters. Prospero's term of endearment for Ariel is "My Ariel, chick" which is repeatedly evoked in Geek Love's Chick as well as by parental references to the children as "my doves." Chick's blue eyed, airy proclivities come from his mother Lil's eyes and her aerialist ambition which she finally attains on the sidewalks of Portland where she hurtles blindly, grabbing "body after body as handholds through the air" (Dunn 13).



Ward, James. Miranda and Caliban. The Royal Shakespeare Theatre Collection, Stratford-upon-Avon.

#### 4. BABY BOOMER MELANCHOLIA

Because Katherine Dunn foregrounds extraordinary bodily compositions to embody the major characters of Geek Love, then how those bodies drive the plot or narrative leaves ample room for contemplation of the ‘disabled’ body.<sup>18</sup> Bodies that American culture generally labels as deformed, monstrous, and less-than-complete populate the scenes in Geek Love.<sup>19</sup> A generation of Binewskis is bred to display a plethora of exceptional bodily variance for the family’s traveling freak show. As an American nuclear family of baby-boomer freaks, the Binewskis cultivate a hybrid between Eisenhower white middle-class concepts of normal and abnormal.

Dunn’s novel offers an American story that spans some 40 years beginning in the midst World War II. The Binewski Carnival Fabulon represents the last of a dying breed of an ‘enterertainment’ form that figures significantly between the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century disability cultural history.<sup>20</sup> Dunn posits the post-war American mentality of economic ambition with a body deemed unsuitable for labor. Even though the freak show industry helped some disabled people avoid poverty (a few incurred lucrative careers), the

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<sup>18</sup> The term “disabled” is a term that is widely used within the contemporary disability community. People with disabilities who also have a developed awareness of disability as a social construct choose the term to locate their cultural position in a society that overvalues non-wheel chair accessible architecture, and other ableist attitudes which barricade the disabled from a quality life-style. Terms such as “differently abled” act as a prosthesis that ultimately masks the specific reality and needs of a disabled person, and therefore promotes an AB orthodoxy that is counter-indicative of disability social identity. The term ‘disable’ does pose a troubling binary however. “Dis” connotes aberration, and therefore the opposite, normalcy. One way to subvert this hierarchical binary is to overemphasize it by doubling the negative and referring to the abled as non-disabled. At this point, I acknowledge my tendency to default to “disability and disabled” with the realization that other words may better capture my intent.

<sup>19</sup> Lucy Guin, Editor of the disability rights magazine Mouth, uses the term “dis-labled” in effort to signify the overwhelming stigmatization involved in being marked as ‘disabled.’

<sup>20</sup> “Enterertainment” is an accidental portmanteau that conflates the Greek word ‘terat’ which means monster, and the word ‘entertainment’, which alludes to amusement. The hybrid readily conveys the tenor of the disabled body as spectacle.

general workforce remained inaccessible to most of those who were disabled.<sup>21</sup> Ergo, the valued American body was one that could conform to, and perform with, late capitalism's industrial design of efficiency.

Olympia Binewski's assertion that the physically and mentally "normal" body is in itself an assembly-line product takes a step further Karl Marx's famous observation of how industrialization reduces the human body's value to a mechanical worth equivalent to a cog in machine (Dunn 282). Baby Boom is the moniker given to the U.S. post-World War II mass production of the "normal" body. Young white male veterans used their G.I. benefits and status to start families and careers. Prosperity allowed for bigger and stronger U.S. bodies to populate and embody an American Dream that emerged as the dominant consciousness of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Consequently, the big bang origin of the Baby Boom represents a genesis of an idealized of bodies that are imbued with the athletic qualities of the model soldier: strength, agility and mobility.

However, the embodied American Dream is matched by an embodied American Nightmare. As the U.S. White middle-class body was nourished by food, vaccines, sports and peace, the U.S. government was fathering a teratogenesis away from home. Ostensibly it was for the protection of the American dream that the United States feels it had a duty to use nuclear physics to annihilate the citizens of the two major Japanese cities. The atomic bombs melted and scarred Japanese bodies. The bombs' radioactivity also affected many bodies in the ensuing generation. Furthermore, the U.S. military is replicating another Nagasaki/Hiroshima-style teratogenesis upon the Pacific indigenous inhabitants of the Marshall Islands. So-called

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<sup>21</sup> Current statistics continue to show an abnormally high rate of unemployment among disabled adults. The rate approaches 65% unemployment.

“jellyfish babies,” children without bones, are being born on this archipelago that the U.S. military has confiscated to use as a bombing test site.<sup>22</sup>

Although my focus here is on the bodies of Pacific Islanders that the U.S. Military exposed to radioactive fallout, about 180,000 of postwar military personnel who were stationed in the Pacific were subject to the fallout as well. A letter by an army scientist encourages “the use of human subjects in radiation research”; indeed, about 3,000 service personnel “unknowingly participated in classified medical experiments” (Fleischer and Zames 179). The army scientist further states concern over the potential criticism that could arise because the military’s use of human research evokes “Nazi experiments” and “would have a little of the Buchenwald touch” (Fleischer and Zames 179).

Additionally, U.S. corporations, as well as the U.S. military, have a significant history of teratogenic creativity due to toxic waste at home and abroad. Also, poverty in the U.S. contributes to teratogenic possibilities for those who can’t afford the costs of nutrition and medical care.

Like a family that hides its disabled relative in the attic or in an institution, the U.S. rarely acknowledges its teratogenic progeny.<sup>23</sup> U.S. headlines tout economic success, not side effects. Meanwhile, down in the rec room, the 1940s and 50s photographs of military males that are hanging on the wood paneled walls warily eye the Baby Boomer who is busily reading Shakespeare’s The Tempest. She might look like Katherine Dunn using postmodern logic to connect Caliban with the legacy of the “nuclear family.”<sup>24</sup> Realizing that the American Dream

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<sup>22</sup> Additionally, U.S. corporations, as well as the U.S. military, have a significant history of teratogenic creativity due to toxic waste at home and abroad. Also, poverty in the U.S. contributes to teratogenic possibilities for those who can’t afford the costs of nutrition and medical care.

<sup>23</sup> As per Fleischer and Zames, the U.S. military minimizes its accountability for compromising the health of its personnel. (180) “In 1993, when the Pentagon announced that it was declassifying test information and releasing the participants from their vows of secrecy, these World War II soldiers began speaking out” (181).

<sup>24</sup> The atomic age term “nuclear family” evolved between 1945 and 1950.

and Nightmare are bonded like the two strands of a DNA double helix, the Dunn clone, flicks on her computer and, with staccato strokes, keys the epigraph for Geek Love:

*This thing of darkness I Acknowledge mine.*

– Prospero, *The Tempest* 5.1.275-6

N. Katherine Hayle poses an interesting concept with regard to Dunn's strategy. Hayle coins Dunn's technique as "Postmodern Parataxis" whereby the shifting of metaphor and metonyms in Geek Love are like the coordinates of the long strands of DNA. Hayle focuses on how the postmodern condition needs to retain a sense of the body's evolutionary past as well as its stratified social histories. This paper concerns itself then with Hayle's line of thought by taking into account the genetic legacies and the connecting the literary genealogies that Dunn employs for a teratogenesis that is interested in preserving its role in the evolutionary future.

With postmodern logic, one can envision the radioactive fallout from the atom bomb somehow making its way toward the imagined nucleus of American society: the two parents, 2.5 children family. At least, one could argue for using the fallout as a metaphor for whatever the mentality is that transformed the nuclear family of the 1940s and 50s into the dysfunctional family of the 1970s and 80s. In a time when the increased rate of divorce allows for the postmodernist creation of the nuclear family to explode like a separating atom, Dunn subverts the notion of the ideally cohesive American family by exposing it to radioactive products of late capitalism. And so, the Binewski family literally warps into a 4.5 children family of two boys and two and a half girls. And, like many American families of its era, the Binewskis disintegrate due to interfamilial betrayals.

Only, the Binewskis' breakup is manifested by the atomic flare of psychically induced spontaneous combustion rather than by divorce papers. Angry at Arty's betrayal of the family,

the telekinetic Chick blew up like an atomic bomb. Oly's account of the scene echoes the descriptions related by Japanese survivors of the atomic bombings of Nagasaki and Hiroshima: "The white rocking air hit us before the sound. I heard nothing, but raised my hands against the rushing air, and the fire came, toppling toward us in falling blocks like the wave in a child's dream, huge, [...]. It came billowing scorching toward us [...]" (Dunn 319).

Contrary to the teratogenic legacies of the surviving victims of Nagasaki and Hiroshima, radioactive fallout does not shape the bodies of the Binewski offspring. Rather, the Binewski parents, Al and Lil, intentionally expose Lil, during ovulation and gestation, to radioisotopes, poisons and drugs in effort to maintain their version of the American Dream. Al and Lil utilize the available techniques to refigure their DNA to produce children with aesthetically valuable bodies. According to Olympia, her father's idea is a hybrid of necessity – the family freak show was short of acts – and of horticultural example. While ruminating over his fiscal predicament at an experimental rose garden, "[t]he roses started him thinking, how the oddity of them was beautiful and how that oddity was contrived to give them value" (Dunn 9).

Al crafts DNA like Jackson Pollock handles paint; like Pollock, Al creates controversial "masterpieces" that challenge the status quo of perception (Dunn 9). But, Al's name for his eldest offspring, "Arty," also infers pretensions of artistic mannerism much like the 'dime museum' spuriously conveys an intellectual respectability for the original freak show venue. Arty's criticism of Al's limited imagination can point at the reality of the low-minded opportunism inherent in all carnival impresarios:

If Papa had discovered fire [...] he'd think it was for sticking in your mouth to amaze a crowd. ...If Papa had invented the wheel ... he'd had laid it flat ... put a merry-go-round on it ... and figured that's as far as it went. ...If he'd discovered America ... he would have gone home and forgot about it ... because it didn't have any hotdog stands. (Dunn 92-3)

Regardless of Arty's protestations of Al's lack of imagination, however, Arty's invention of the Arturan body is akin to a magician's standard staple of sawing a woman in half. At one point even Oly challenges, "Are you swallowing your own line of shit Arty Binewski? Aren't you forgetting that you're just a two-bit freak with a gimmick?" (Dunn 269)

For Dunn, it's the embodied carnivalesque, not the historic carnival, which provides entrance to the sublime. In Geek Love, the stakes are higher than sheer amusement. Olympia observes, "The standard approach, and the line that Papa always wanted Arty to take, was jokes, a creaking stand-up patter that would seem unique coming from the Aqua Boy [Arty's stage name]" (Dunn 50). As per Arty, the crowds "want to be amazed and scared. That's why they're here" (Dunn 50). Likewise, Geek Love doesn't forge for mere subversive pranks either.

The story of the Binewskis is much larger than a zany concept with toss-away gags that subvert normalcy. Granted, the premise for the 1960s situation comedy, The Munsters parodies the nuclear family by devaluing all that is 'normal' in favor of the monstrous body. However, Geek Love engages the same parodiable formula to create a situational sublimity; the Binewskis feel absolute terror over any offspring that appears normal. When after several searches over Chick's body fail to uncover any abnormality, Lil is distraught with disbelief. Dunn renders the anxiety of the family scene to the poignant pitch:

"But ... " she begins, turns the babe back to re-examine his front. "But, Al ... " And the tent of wrinkles appears on her smooth forehead, the doubt that I had never seen in her eyes before. Al turns away and then quickly forces himself to come back to her. He puts his hands on her cheeks and strokes softly.

"It's true, Lil. There's nothing. He's just a regular ... regular baby." And then Lil's face is wet and her breath is bubbling nastily. Al is darting at me where I am holding Arty up in the doorway, and Elly and Iphy are pulling on my arm, and Al says, "You kids fix some supper for yourselves – get, now – leave your mom to rest." And Lil's soggy voice is crying, "I did everything, Al. ...I did what you said, Al. ...What happened, Al? How could this happen?"

Dramatic scenes of nondisabled parents crying over their newborn infant's disabilities are daily occurrences in American maternity wards. It is parental pain of unmet expectation that drives the lucrative success of charities for genetic research like The March of Dimes. Dunn adroitly wrought the emotional rejection of a defective child by normal parents later in the novel when Oly's prospective boyfriend, Vinnie the hunchback Pin Kid, informs her, "You're lucky, Oly, [...] My ma cried a lot just looking at me" (Dunn 288). Rarely can the disabled body publicly complain about its excessively undervalued status in society; statements such as the Pin Kid's are never profiled in the brochures of charities that seek to eradicate "birth defects."

The Munster and the Binewski mothers also share the same first name, Lillian: a name that sounds blue blooded, but actually signifies the demonized Lilith of Persian and Jewish folklore.

Geek Love's historical contextualization with the American use of nuclear physics in WW II, as well as with the death machinery employed by the Nazis, interrogates the Baby Boomer subconscious for situational sublimity. The Baby Boomer must live with the disconcerting paradox that society can utilize nuclear energy as easily for the purpose of mass consumption as for mass destruction. Olympia Binewski negotiates a similar paradoxical situation when she chooses to defend her disabled daughter's body from Miss Lick's surgical strike by killing Miss Lick with the Nazi gas chamber technique that was perfected on disabled people.<sup>25</sup> Olympia's decision is not just a crude form of poetic justice. Instead, her choice of weapon demonstrates what is available from the palette of the sublime environment of post-World War II where the possibility of mass destruction is a part of everyday life. Olympia

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<sup>25</sup> At the Washington, D.C. January 10, 2001 unveiling of the statue of Franklin D. Roosevelt in a wheelchair, the following comment reveals the symbolism of the disabled FDR as the heroic foil to the Final Solution: "A man in a wheel chair beats Adolf Hitler – not bad" (Mouth Magazine 5). The Weimar Republic's "Final Solution" apparatus was first designed, tested and streamlined on people with disabilities; FDR's body would have been targeted as "life not worth living."

Binewski's melancholy captures the Elizabethan and Jacobean preoccupation with death that was popularized by Hamlet. For the Baby Boomer the Jacobean memento mori of the skull is juxtaposed with the nuclear mushroom cloud and the Nazi death camps. Consider a Baby Boomer's associative experience with Olympia's statement, "I write the license number on my wrist with a felt-tip pen and feel as though I've conquered Asia" (17). The image of scrawled numbers on a wrist reflects the Nazi cataloguing system of the holocaust victims by tattooing the reference number on wrists. Olympia has appropriated a visual from the Nazis for the purposes of her own agency. Indeed, the Nazi reference is furthered by Hitler's scheme to be a world conqueror.

A more surreal symbolism involves the gas-chamber door image. Evoke in the title of Chapter Seven in relation to the Nazi institutions' gas-chambers, the heavy steel door crop up two more times in the novel under ghoulish circumstances. The door, pried from one of the vans, serves as an operating table for Frosty the horse's experimental amputation. Reminiscent of Nazi experiments on disabled people in preparation for the holocaust, Frosty, disabled by rotted hooves, was the prelude for the Arturan amputations. The door is used again as a stretcher to carry the twins, who were given a Mickey, to the operating arena for Electra's involuntary. This time associative visions of Nazi experimentations on twins stalk into the reader's consciousness.

Considering the scale of contemporary concerns, perhaps Hamlet's histrionics are more appropriate rhetoric than the Eisenhower cool country club language of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For Olympia Binewski, Hamlet's self-absorption with death, replication and legacy is relevant to her need to commemorate and reproduce the Binewski lineage: both she and Hamlet "are big on family" (Dunn 261). Olympia and Hamlet's need to deceive and kill in order

to avenge the powers that would usurp their rightful place in the family tree. Olympia's emotional struggle between weakness and bravery imitates Hamlet's. Her imitation is so acute that she implements Hamlet's Renaissance physiological psychology of the humors to describe her interiority:

[...] and gasp my way in with my heart playing hide-and-seek in my ears. ...  
 "Oly" she bellows ... The name freezes my lungs. The skin all over my body rises in pimples of fear. (Dunn 345)

This much anger and this much pleasure should not be crowded into two short hours. My liver, or whatever it is that's trying to crowd my left leg, can't take it.  
 (Dunn 33)

Olympia's mapping of anatomical links to emotions is like a romp through the Shakespeare Concordance. Note how Hamlet locates the same presence of, or lack thereof, courage, fear, and anger within his heart, lungs and liver respectively:

Hold, Hold, my heart,  
 And you, my sinews [...]  
 But bear me stiffly up. [...] (Hamlet 1.5.93-5)  
 Am I a coward?  
 Who calls me villain [...]  
 [...] gives me the lie i'th' throat  
 As deep as to the lungs? [...]  
 But I am pigeon-livered and lack gall  
 To make oppression bitter [...] (Hamlet 2.2.548-9, 551-2, 554-5)

Olympia, however, betrays her vulnerability to an emotion that Shakespeare doesn't seem to notice possibly because it's a condition specific to the 20<sup>th</sup> century condition, stress. The "whatever" that may have been trying to escape down Olympia's leg earlier is her stomach. Olympia's stomach which makes at least eight crawling, clawing and leaping appearances throughout the course of *Geek Love*. Olympia's constantly roving stomach proves that Hamlet missed out on some fun, "My stomach came all the way up and out, then snapped back like a frog's tongue" (Dunn 291). In an absolute veer away from Renaissance psychology, Olympia

actually locates an emotion in the brain. She suggests the sentimentality of impassioned memory when she grieves, “[...] because instead of a brain she has been blessed with a flame-purple hemorrhoid and she is in miserable, though voluntary, exile until her little project is finished” (Dunn 329).

## 5. TELETHON BLUES

In Geek Love, Dunn proffers a vision of a human family that moves from the American Dream into a postmodern paradigm. Through the study of the Binewski family's teratogenesis, the unconscious horror of the American Nightmare is brought to consciousness. The fixed construct of normalcy is thrown into chaos. New bodily constructs are culled from the primordial ooze of creation to take over the world!!! It's the Revenge of the Worms!!! Actually, the disabled body is allowed to be in the center of the cultural matrix where its real true lived experience is allowed to flourish, and to also parody the habits of the normate. As a result, the binary of the abnormal body and the normal body is broken down and thus the discovery that the narrow definition of acceptable genetic expression may be cultivating a defective body. The normate body's claim that it is the fittest for survival can be challenged. Arty demonstrates that allure is what engineers the competitive edge.

In 1989, Dunn is already anticipating the ethical questions that are generated by the Human Genome Project. By locating the eugenic science and the nuclear science as well as their application within the military science of World War II into an industry that is notable for scientific fakery—the sideshow carnival, Dunn is able to benchmark the level of cultural intelligence that guides the bioethics of the Human Genome Project. What constitutes the perfect body? In Geek Love, the disabled body is elevated as the ideal paradigm. Its brain doesn't transcend the rest of the body as much as it cultivates a high IQ of interdependency, and self-determination; not of independence and self-sufficiency which is inherently competitive. In short, good cooperative social skills are the key to survival. Arty had quality attendant services, and an accessible loving community. The artificial barriers constructed by normates didn't exist at the Binewski Carnival Fabulon. As mama Binewski put it, Arty was able to spread his wings.

His megalomania is either a mute point or a bad normative gene that continues to elude the genetic researchers. Could a telethon for the sufferer and victims of megalomania be, as AI would say, "worthy of a man's interest" (Dunn 10)? How about a fundraiser to find a cure for Eugenicist Personality Disorder? Where's Jerry Lewis when you need him?

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