

Affirmative Freakery, Freaky Methodologies: Circus and Its Bodies without Organs in Disability Circus

David Fancy

There is a common dynamic of enfreakment—those mythologizations and minoritizations associated with and generating the figure of the “freak” (Kérchy and Zittlau 2012, 1)—mappable in the discursive and lived histories of both circus and disability. From nineteenth-century constructions and depictions of “monstrous” disability circulating in Euro-American popular culture (Rai 2004; Bogdan 1988; Hevey 1992) that still negatively mark contemporary understandings of the differently-abled, to the circus arts’ long-term reliance on the exoticization of naturally exceptional corporealities (Hurley 2016), the parallels and convergences are evident. In what ways can such intersections be generative for the present theorization and practice of circus, especially questions around *Circus and Its Others* framing this collection of written interventions? By extension and more specifically, how can we think through and beyond what has come to constitute the relatively impermeable distinction between “(mainstream) circus” and what is often called “social circus”—that “other” of circus (proper) that is understood to engage the social and political more directly than its allegedly more politically disinterested and aesthetically accomplished relation (Infantino 2016, 447–49; Lavers 2016, 508–25; Spiegel 2016)?

In this article, I draw on the ways the thought of French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari can limit methodological tendencies toward binarization and hierarchization (1987) and invoke reflections on some of my recent practice at the intersection of circus and disability (*Recounting Huronia Cabaret* 2016). I proceed in this fashion in order to think how we might put the shared genealogies of disability and circus to work to generate new circus art and discourse that simultaneously embraces both the aesthetic and the political, recognizing the always-already mutual generativity of these two often falsely stabilized methodological categories. By demonstrating the mutual constitutedness of the aesthetic and the political via an example of disability or “crip” (McCruer 2006) circus, I seek to problematize and forestall the taxonomic supremacy implied in any suggestion that social circus is necessarily the freaky, differently-abled and poor cousin of “circus proper”: big on heart, weak on virtuosity and aesthetics. Key to this project will be the articulation of specific aesthetic strategies emergent at the intersection of a range of virtuosities that constitute mainstream and social circus, in this case from the encounter of disabled and more traditionally abled circus bodies. In case my observations here are seen to be reductively operationalizing disability simply to fuel circus discourse and practice, let it be said from the outset that while the focus of this publication is circus, the insights generated throughout this inquiry celebrate disability as a locus of exploring diversities of corporeality as much as they celebrate circus for the same.

Central to my thinking is the notion of the Body without Organs (BwO) initiated by Antonin Artaud (1982) and taken up by Deleuze and Guattari (1987). Both a concept and series of practices, the BwO can help explore the ways in which circus bodies as well as disabled bodies—perhaps especially so when working in concert or when they are indeed the same body—serve to both semiotically and affectively *exceed* the possibilities of what are constituted as being more normative

David Fancy is associate professor in the Department of Dramatic Arts at Brock University. He is currently publishing on immanence and performance, as well as immanence, electromagnetics, performance, and social control.

bodies in contemporary late-capitalist societies in the economic north. Indeed, the BwO as proposed by Deleuze and Guattari is well suited for transcending the parameters of normative corporeality. The BwO can be understood to be a postidentitarian body in that it is not reduceable or recuperable to discourses of autonomy, self-governance, and separation that are traditionally part and parcel of bourgeois subjectivity (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 149–66). Additionally, given the range of bodies that the concept embraces given its postidentitarian status (including social bodies, animal bodies, bodies of thought, bodies constituted of collections of other bodies, etc.), the notion of the BwO can be used to question the validity of the taxonomic separation of “circus” from “social circus” in contemporary discussions about the art form.

I come to this inquiry as a member of an artist-researcher team funded for three years (2013–16) by the Social Sciences and Humanities and Research Council of Canada involving intellectually disabled (ID) survivors of extensive institutional abuse at the hands of the Ontario government at the Huronia Regional Centre in Orillia, Ontario. From the late nineteenth century, individuals diagnosed as “idiots” or as “feble-minded” (Binet and Simon 1916) were placed into provincially-run institutions where many remained institutionalized for life (Barken 2013; Malacrida 2005, 2006; Inclusion BC n.d.; Walmsley 2005). Although the majority of such institutions have closed in Ontario, former residents speak of widespread physical, sexual, mental and emotional abuse while living there, as well as ongoing trauma from these experiences (Institutional Survivors n.d.). Huronia, formerly the Orillia Asylum for Idiots, was one of Canada’s first and largest residential facilities for people with IDs.

As one response to the complex historical reality of these institutions, our project, entitled *Recounting Huronia*, engaged all manner of creative work, including poetry, storytelling, bookmaking, and circus work in group settings, with a view to providing members of the oft-silenced survivor populations an opportunity to re-tell their experience of institutionalization on their own terms. As part of the process, I invited dancer and circus artist Alisa Walton to participate in monthly creative meetings with the survivor co-researchers in a process that resulted, among other outcomes, in a cabaret at Buddies in Bad Times Theatre in Toronto in the spring of 2016, further discussed below. The group of survivors in question had all been involved in a settlement agreement reached in a class action lawsuit brought against the province of Ontario by former Huronia residents in July 2010 that was approved by the Ontario Superior Court in early December 2013. This decision was followed soon thereafter by an apology in the Ontario Legislature delivered by Premier Kathleen Wynne. Although Wynne stated in her remarks that “Today . . . we no longer see people with developmental disabilities as other” (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation 2013), this can most generously be understood as an aspirational statement. As the work from the project revealed, many Huronia survivors living with ID felt otherwise about their ongoing experience. They spoke often of living with continued stigmatization of their condition in what they experienced as a seeming continuation of a now demonstrated history of emotional, physical, sexual, and psychological abuse, abuses implicitly sanctioned by the historical construction of disability as abject, dangerous, unclean, impure, and, since the late nineteenth century, deserving of medicalization and frequently correction (Rossiter and Clarkson 2013).

Seeking to add substance to the kinds of aspirational statements such as Premier Wynne’s, the field of Critical Disability Studies is premised in many ways on the understanding that the work of achieving the goals of more complex and equitable practices of diversity should not be entirely in the hands of abled populations (Withers 2012). Colleagues participating in the *Recounting Huronia* project have suggested that “The lawsuits do more than reconcile past wrongs through the demand for

apology or financial compensation, but also provide legitimating space for the historically-silenced narratives from people with ID about institutionalization to emerge and be entered into public record” (Rossiter and Clarkson 2013, 1). Based on decisions made in collaboration with participant-researchers drawn from those leading the class action suit and their contemporaries, part of the necessary work of such kinds of legitimation that form the bulk of our *Recounting Huronia* project involved the re-narrativization of experiences of ID through engagement with circus. In the face of witnessing some video of rehearsals of the silks and suspended ropes work that became integral to the project, Barry Smith, the senior citizen Huronia survivor with whom I worked closely for three years on storytelling projects, explained that the team’s collaboration with Alisa Walton “allows us to seek truth and justice by helping us be everything we’ve been prevented from being, and more.” Barry continued by stating, speaking both of the art form he was witnessing and of his fellow survivors, “Circus is a place for me, for us all to be free. People do wonderful things there. We do wonderful things. We are circus” (Smith 2015).

In our work together, Barry often reminded me that his sense of agency and self-determination had frequently been suppressed by minoritizing perceptions of people with ID. Early in the work, he noted that “People think we’re freaks and monsters, it’s so wrong” (Smith 2013). Telling remarks such as these initiated in the creative team the desire to bring together histories of freakery shared between disability and historical popular art forms like the freak show. Speaking to the source of exotifications informing both these narratives, Amit S. Rai has noted that the forms of “the freak” and “the monster” “gave birth to modernity: those unnameable figures of horror and fascination shadow civilization as its constitutive and abject discontent” (2004, 539). As such, “freaks” are constructed to remind us that civilization is a thin veneer over an otherwise consuming chaos, a human analogue of the perceived risks of degrading and anarchic forces lurking at the perimeter of a well-ordered body politic. Speaking specifically to the contemporary, Laura Davis and Cristina Santos note that the figure of freak and the monstrous engage “real anxieties about our vulnerability in an age of rapid globalization” (2010, xi). Disability scholars such as Margrit Shildrick trace the monstrous as it manifests as part of the long-term depiction of disability as unwanted difference from accepted bodily norms, when, from Biblical depictions onwards, “disability can be positioned as an abomination that is subject to an array of exclusionary and purification procedures” (2008, 46–47).

Addressing the ways in which representations of disability intersect with freakery and the monstrous in popular entertainment, Robin Larsen observes that, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, “circuses and carnival sideshows had given people with disabilities a slight amount of honored status and celebrity” (2002, 1). Other scholars stress that objectification of the disabled body nonetheless continued throughout this period and forced the disabled person to be offered up to “the voyeuristic property of the non-disabled gaze” (Hevey 1992, 72). Echoing this line of thinking, Bogdan described the freak show as “the pornography of disability” (1988, 2), with the freak show being a dominant representation of disability before disability became “medicalized” (63).

The echoes between the exceptionalism of circus bodies more widely and the focused realities of the freak show are invoked by Erin Hurley. She compares corporeal exceptionalism acquired through extensive training with the innate exceptionalism of “naturally” unorthodox corporealities and the manifestations of difference each of these forms of exceptionalism enact. Hurley notes, after Graver, that the display of these “fleshy bodies” is marked by previously circulating representational tropes of naturally exceptional corporealities: “It may be argued that all circus bodies are tainted with

the residue of the sideshow freak body” (2016, 134). She continues by referencing Grosz’s writing on the abject: “In the sideshow, born freaks’ existence ‘imperils categories and oppositions dominant in social life’” (quoted in Hurley 2016, 134). Hurley notes that even as stage bodies that embody the putative normalcy of the audience’s bodies occupy important “character bodies” within the narrative spaces of influential contemporary Cirque du Soleil productions, and even as acquired exceptionalism is emphasized and foregrounded in many Cirque du Soleil shows (138), the freaky bodies of those such as contortionists continue to interrupt the more normative character bodies’ full command of the narrative and fictional spaces these circus productions generate (138–39). As such it may be that the enduring freight of actively mystified otherness associated with the freaky body is still working in these productions as a locus of exoticism. The implications of this, Hurley suggests, following Rosemary Garland, are potentially significant: “A freak show’s cultural work is to make the physical particularity of the freak into a hyper-visible text against which the viewer’s indistinguishable body fades into a neutral, tractable, and invulnerable instrument of the autonomous will” (quoted in Hurley 2016, 138). This dynamic serves, in Hurley’s words, to have the abnormalities of the freaks’ bodies in the circus freak-show “secure the superiority of the ‘normal’ or ordinary body” (138) of the voyeuristic spectator.

Given the current pervasiveness of Cirque du Soleil as the globally recognized purveyor of exceptional bodies, is there then an inevitability to exotified depictions of naturally other-than-normative bodies in contemporary circus? A number of additional and interrelated questions motivated the thinking around the circus in the *Recounting Huronia* project: Can the convergence of critical perspective and practices around disability in circus serve to mutually deterritorialize the minoritizing and exoticizing myths of these historically intertwined types of corporealities (circus and disability)? How can those with intellectual disabilities often complemented by physical challenges understand their bodies to exceed limits, boundaries whose crossing Hurley points out is integral to the kinds of body-limitations-defying actions born from acquired exceptionalism at the heart of a Cirque de Soleil production (2016, 122–24)? Is there a way in which the discourses of freakery can be shed by those with intellectual and other disabilities by reflexively inviting such individuals to partner with artists pursuing acquired exceptionalism through high-performance circus virtuosities? Can the pursuit of such strategies allow disabled bodies to move beyond what Petra Kuppens argues to be narratives of tragedy and loss usually associated with the disabled experience (2009, 224)?

These questions can be approached by first articulating a perspective on embodiment that provides us with a way of understanding: a) the fundamental mutability of corporeality; b) the ways in which dominant discourses centralize appropriately abled, gendered, and raced bodies; and c) the means by which we can push back on those forms of capture. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) undertake such a perspective by distinguishing what they describe as organs, the organism, and the Body without Organs or BwO. With the Body without Organs, Deleuze and Guattari posit a concept and practices that resist the constraining and contorting role that discourses and performativities enforce upon bodies. Instead, they propose a preindividual, preidentitarian substrate composing all bodies, be they human, institutional, conceptual, or otherwise. Deleuze and Guattari understand this substrate to be composed of nonformed, nonorganized, and nonstratified affects and material components that are then stratified and territorialized—their terms for organized and captured—through material and discursive processes in time that result in the intelligible forms of bodies and discourses with which all bodies make sense of and negotiate the world (1987, 149–66). In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari ask “How do you make a Body without Organs?” They suggest in initial response that we all already “have one (or several)” and that “It’s not so much that it preexists or comes ready-

made, although in certain respects it is preexistent.” What is clear is that the BwO is key to all development and change given that while a body needs to have some agency in making one, in actualizing what is inherent within it, “you can’t desire without making one.” They continue by suggesting that “it is an inevitable exercise or experimentation, already accomplished the moment you undertake it, unaccomplished as long as you don’t” (149). They describe the BwO as “not at all a notion or a concept, but a practice, a set of practices” (149–50), thereby avoiding the notion that the “idea” of the BwO is somehow exterior or transcendent to its actualization. Practices of experimentation, such as people with ID exploring new expressions of their sociality and singularity through creative activity, can, for example, be considered as practices actualizing their BwOs.

Deleuze and Guattari invoke the moment in 1948 when Artaud “declares war on the organs” in his *To Have Done With the Judgment of God* (1958) stating, “there is nothing more useless than the organs” (1987, 150). The “organs,” those enumerated, taxonomized, fetishized, and deeply socially invested categorizations of corporealities, are what need to be removed and by extension exceeded in order to explore “what the body can do” outside of epistemologically restricting and socially constructed norms of embodiment. “The BwO is what remains when you take everything away,” Deleuze and Guattari affirm, specifying that, “What you take away is precisely the phantasy, and significances and subjectifications as a whole” (151). In other words, to actualize the BwO one seeks to remove anything that traps a body into normative modes of engagement, interaction, and self-definition. Given that the BwO inheres within bodies as potentiality, Deleuze and Guattari draw on Deleuze’s earlier work on ontology and the nature of the real (Deleuze 1994) to propose a schema in which that which is potential is still real, but is *intensive*, while that which is actual is equally real, but *extensive*. The BwO can best be understood as a mobilizing force that “causes intensities to pass; it produces and distributes them in a *spatium* that is itself intensive, lacking extension” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 153). As such the BwO is that which simultaneously precedes and inheres within every moment:

That is why we treat the BwO as the full egg before the extension of the organism and the organization of the organs, before the formation of the strata; as the intense egg defined by axes and vectors, gradients and thresholds, by dynamic tendencies involving energy transformation and kinematic movements involving group displacement, by migrations: all independent of *accessory forms* because the organs appear and function here only as pure intensities. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 153)

Given that it is such a field of potentiality, the BwO is always at risk of constraint and capture by forces that would aim to contain it. Deleuze and Guattari describe the BwO as being composed of desire and note that: “Every time desire is betrayed, cursed, uprooted from its field of immanence, a priest is behind it. The priest casts the triple curse on desire: the negative law, the extrinsic rule, and the transcendent ideal” (1987, 154). The restricting “priest” that would harness the desire and potentiality of the BwO inhering in bodies can be many factors, ones that can intersect and amplify each other’s constraining effects. These might include a dominant discourse (patriarchal, colonial, ableist), an institution, a self-styled *doyen* or expert, and so forth. Such forces would, in late capital, wish to construct desire as lack or absence (the negative law) as well as suggest that bodies are unable to be moved by their own potential to differentiate and change but are instead governed by external forces (the extrinsic law). The “priest” would argue that such restrictive forces are in fact rooted in natural and inevitable “truths” of the cosmos to which individual bodies are subject (the transcendent ideal). The “priest” who casts the triple curse, Deleuze and Guattari explain, “cannot

bear the BwO, because He pursues it and rips it apart so He can be first, and have the organism be first” (159).

They also observe that, under the yoke of “the judgment of God” of which Artaud (1982) speaks:

The organism is not at all the body, the BwO; rather, it is a stratum on the BwO, in other words, a phenomenon of accumulation, coagulation, and sedimentation that, in order to extract useful labor from the BwO, imposes upon it forms, functions, bonds, dominant and hierarchized organizations, organized transcendences. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 159)

“We are continually stratified,” then, as the BwO “is that glacial reality where the alluvions, sedimentations, coagulations, foldings, and recoilings that compose an organism—and also a signification and a subject—occur.” Indeed, it is in the BwO “that the organs enter into the relations of composition called the organism” (159) that can only be moved beyond via the activation of intensity and desire inherent within it.

In the model of the BwO, subjectivity is not a starting point but the result of processes that construct it, which thereby open out onto the potential of as yet unlived subjectivities and corporealities. Given that these new forms will necessarily involve that which is unorthodox, an alignment with the body *in extremis* of the naturally exceptional as well as disabled bodies is clear. The emphasis, however, in Deleuze and Guattari’s deeply “inventionist” model (Massumi 2002, 12) of generating potentialities for the new, the excluded, the unrecognized, and the allegedly unlived serves to reposition the exceptionalism of the circus and disabled bodies, both acquired and innate. Deleuze and Guattari would agree that the so-called freak, the exceptional body no matter its provenance, has been adeptly captured and capitalized upon from Barnum to Laliberté via cultivation of exotification and various subtle or unsubtle forms of minoritization that allow a ticket-buying public to be both alarmed but ultimately comforted by their own putative normativity. Indeed, their thought helps us understand that, as manifestations of potentialities inherent in the human experience of corporeality, no longer are such othered bodies simply exotic outliers to be sought for thrill, thrall, and titillation in the socially sanctioned spaces of display beyond normative social and corporeal relations. Instead, in the Deleuzo-Guattarian model, these bodies are profoundly ethical sites at the very core of our work in the world as beings. As such, circus and/or disabled bodies involve enacting and constructing previously unexpressed and/or suppressed lifeways and potentialities as a lived ethical instruction about the importance of differentiation. Exceptional bodies can serve as examples for those clinging anxiously to normativities that can only constrain them, no matter how orthodox they think they are or wish themselves to be. Exceptional bodies can share the ethical project of the BwO: the important work of exploring the full implication of Spinoza’s influential dictum that “nobody knows what a body can do” (Deleuze 1988, 17).

And yet enacting that desire and those releases is not simply a matter of a commitment to chaos or a submission to pure vitalism given the risks inherent in a too-rapid commitment to the actualization of a BwO that Deleuze and Guattari describe as “wildly destratifying” (1987, 160). “Caution is the art common” to all enactment of the BwO since “in dismantling the organism there are times one courts death, in slipping away from significance and subjection one courts falsehood, illusion and hallucination and psychic death” (160). If you free the BwO “with too violent an action, if you blow

apart the strata without taking precautions, then instead of drawing the plane you will be killed, plunged into a black hole, or even dragged toward catastrophe” (161). How then to proceed?



Harold Dougall, a participant in the *Recounting Huronia Cabaret*. Photo by Alex Tigchelaar.

A key perhaps to articulating the relationship in between circus and disabled bodies via the BwO is to return their shared quality of difference, specifically that of being *in extremis* of one kind or another—that way of simultaneously exceeding normative embodiments by activating the potentials of the BwO. This was one avenue of creative inquiry employed by the cabaret team as we looked at pairing Harold Dougall, one of the survivors currently living in Orillia, with Alisa Walton in a dance where she was suspended contorted on ropes partnered with Harold as he, earthbound, led her about the space. In our studio explorations, the acquired exceptionalism of Alisa’s work came up against the limitations of her own natural body, the “fleshy body” Hurley, after Graver, uses to describe the very fleshiness of the corporeal, with all of its possibilities of pain, of rupture, of failure. Through contortion and restraint meant to express in some sense the difficulties of Harold’s experience at Huronia, the extremity of Alisa’s fleshy body—one she understands by her own description to be “old, failing” (Walton 2015, np)—in the performance moment created an ally-ship with the histories of suffering and trauma of Harold’s historically and individually medicalized, drugged, and restrained body. As Alisa’s aging circus body became one of restraint and pain, this aesthetics of failure echoed and amplified Harold’s articulation of his own experience as a resident of Huronia, with all of its attendant discursive and physical constraints, restrictions, enforced bodily sufferings, and other potentially more intimate violations (Dougall 2015).



Alisa Walton and Harold Dougall in the *Recounting Huronia Cabaret*. Photo: Alex Tigchelaar.

Thinking of Hurley’s typology of circus bodies, Harold, as witness and party to Alisa’s body, was foregrounded—both for himself as well as for the spectator—as having a particular narrative function or personification within the complex histories of institutions such as Huronia and the discourses that sustained them and that they promoted in turn. The inherent criticality of exposing the induced and shared extremity of the two performers, slowly revolving in an intimate dance in which the disabled body leads the constrained traditionally virtuosic body, renarrativizes the experience of enforced institutional suffering by exposing its extreme fleshiness, its implausible arabesques of Agambian bare life. Similarly, the traditional virtuosity of the trained exceptionality of the professional performer is no longer arranged in a horizontal relationship of “excellence” *over* the untrained and disabled body. Instead, the shared power between the performers as manifested in the choreography of routine also expresses—in the context of specific and nuanced artistic choices—an aesthetic counterpoint organized along a horizontal axis of transversality and complementarity.

The simultaneously dual and recursive performance of allyship stages exceptionalisms and virtuosities in productive counterpoint via the intermediary of circus arts. These arts have historically both freed and constrained similar bodies in different ways more directed toward spectacle. And yet, despite the innate exceptionalism of a man with intellectual disabilities, we are invited to consider through Harold’s circus work in the context of the BwO that disability is a doing rather than simply something we are. This opens up his experience to renarrativization, the gradual disentanglement from trauma, and shifting to different narratives than ones of victimhood frequently mobilized as part of the process of litigation that led to the class action. The spectator watching the work sees Harold’s dancing, marked as it is by shivering hands and an uncertain step, in counter-distinction to Alisa’s suspended assurance that demands the extremity of restraint and contortion to bring its fleshiness, its bare embodied self to the surface, simultaneously visible through the flames of the

virtuosic. In this moment of foregrounding of freakery to displace its effects, another virtuosity, one beyond the singularity of Alisa's achievements of her acquired exceptionalism, appears through Harold here. A sort of *virtuosité du quotidien*—a virtuosity of the everyday—is paradoxically exposed in Harold through the convergence of the acquired and innate exceptionalism of these two performers as their character or personifying bodies of the autobiographical renarrativization shift through the shared performance. The result is the revelation of a common origin of both pain and affirmation in which performance is harnessed as a means of displacing minoritizing and enforced performativities and corporeal subjections.

This work is the work of caution in the face of the dangers of “wild destratification” mentioned above: in this particular instance the risks of retraumatization, of physical injury through the work, and of reinscription of minoritizing enfreakment of the types that Harold and the others had already been subjected to during their time at Huronia, and since. Deleuze and Guattari describe a procedure of careful experimentation brought to the fore in the work Alisa and Harold undertook:

Lodge yourself on a stratum, experiment with the opportunities it offers, find an advantageous place on it, find potential movements of deterritorialization, possible lines of flight, experience them, produce flow conjunctions here and there, try out continuums of intensities segment by segment, have a small plot of new land at all times. (1987, 161)

What are some of the implications of the work of creating the “small plot of new land” of the performance? Deleuze and Guattari continue their observation immediately above by noting that “It is through a meticulous relation with the strata that one succeeds in freeing lines of flight, causing conjugated flows to pass and escape and bringing forth continuous intensities for a BwO” (1987, 161). In the careful and meticulous process of creating and performing the work, in actualizing affective and corporeal intensities of the BwO, ultimately freakery itself as a negative term is displaced back onto its source, rather than letting it rest on the resultant site of its projections. An *affirmative freakery*, that of a continuously productive differentiation and generation of difference, is left in the wake of its captured and minoritized cousin. In their performance of pain, tenderness, multiple virtuosities, memory, and trauma, Harold and Alisa affirm their difference, their freakiness. They do so outside of discourses of “nonnormativity” and pathology, working instead to manifest the BwO that inheres in the ways in which they have each been captured and stratified. This movement of the shedding of external subjectivation understood by dominant discourses to be natural leads then to a broader examination of the entire structure of feeling supporting and generating such discursive and embodied “judgments of God.” Deleuze and Guattari describe this shift from individual exploration to broader social bodies:

We are in a social formation; first see how it is stratified for us and in us and at the place where we are; then descend from the strata to the deeper assemblage within which we are held; gently tip the assemblage, making it pass over to the side of the plane of consistency. (1987, 161)

Following these directives, it is clear then that the discourses and institutions that would construct the freakery of disability through the process of exotification, channelled anxiety and projection are challenged. These discourses and institutions themselves are foregrounded as aberration, pathology, in need of correction. Emphasizing this dynamic, the *crip circus* performance of the cabaret was supported by a display of objects placed around the periphery of the auditorium that drew attention

to the medicalization and pathologization of IDs that occurred in Huronia. Physical restraints, whipping belts, barred crib cots, phrenological equipment: these objects referenced the history of the freak show as a historical precedent for disability theatre. They also foregrounded freakery and aberration as central to the institutional and discursive dynamics that medicalized and pathologized those it actively constructed as other. The discourse is sick, not the “freak” itself. Continuous difference, or *affirmative freakery*, is our collective and liberatory ontological heritage that courageous artists such as Alisa and Harold remind us of through their work.

A conceptual tool such as the BwO allows us to recognize that the construction of otherness—an apparent bifurcating epistemological premise informing the naming of the Circus and Its Others gathering that led to this journal issue—will always already be but an ontological mirage. Such an illusion posits essential difference where in fact complex relationalities and alliances can always be sought out, affirmed, drawn upon to enact complex horizontal relations of mutual becoming rather than vertical relationships of epistemological or other forms of hierarchization. And so, the work with Barry, Harold, Alisa and others, engaged with via a range of circus bodies culminating in the BwO as a body of ethical potentiality, causes a meta- or methodological consideration at this point in this paper, best posed—given the necessary brevity of the reflections here—as questions. Can we challenge a problematic taxonomization circulating in contemporary circus studies that appears to posit circus practices not pursuing immediately commercial and/or aesthetic ends as being recuperable to the designation of social circus? Does this nomenclature not necessarily reaffirm the cultural supremacy of commercial and/or aesthetically oriented circus and by extension, the dominant arrangements of capitalist and/or neoliberal order that support their circulation as commodities? Can the variously virtuosic but nonetheless socially engaged work undertaken in the context of projects such as the *Recounting Huronia Cabaret* be understood to undermine in part the minoritizing tendencies in the designation social circus? Instead, could those other bodies of social circus, released even slightly from the contortive restraints of a discourse that would posit social as the minor to the major of cultural capital, not just in the world of circus practice, but in the equally potentially constrained field of circus studies, serve as an invitation to posit a Body without Organs of the very field itself? Does the possessive operating in the phrase “Circus and Its Others” risk presupposing that circus owns its others when in fact we’ve seen that circus understood via the BwO can in fact liberate a field of difference that can reverse the power dynamics implied in such objectification, enfreakment, and ownership? Isn’t a circus that embraces its BwO comprised of its own difference, its own differentiation? In short, isn’t circus always already its others?

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