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The American Dime Museum: Bodily Spectacle and Social Midways in Turn-of-the-Century American Literature and Culture

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THE AMERICAN DIME MUSEUM:
BODILY SPECTACLE AND SOCIAL MIDWAYS
IN TURN-OF-THE-CENTURY
AMERICAN LITERATURE AND CULTURE

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the
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at the University of Kentucky

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

THE AMERICAN DIME MUSEUM:
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The freak played a significant role in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century entertainment, but its significance extended beyond such venues as sideshows and minstrel shows. This dissertation examines the freak as an avatar emblematic of several issues, such as class and race, traditionally focused on in studies of Turn-of-the-Century American literature and culture.

Disability and freakishness are explored as central to late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Americans’ identity. Freakishness is applied to a series of ways in which Americans in this period constructed their identity, including race, gender, and socioeconomic class, showing the dual role that the freak played for many white, able-bodied, upper-class American men. Freaks threatened such men’s sense of their own disability, triggering such complexes as Wounded Southernness or white masculinity. But contrasting themselves with freaks also solidified their visions of themselves as models of American normalcy. Besides freak shows, they encountered freakishness in a variety of arenas, including lynchings, slums, and early horror films.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth century’s fascination with freakishness is situated as an outgrowth of that period’s eugenics movement, showing how the entwined concepts of eugenics and normalcy traversed ground that went much further than studies of physical aberration and chronic illness. This extended notion of the freak is discussed by analyzing various literary texts, especially the novels of William Dean Howells and Jack London. The autobiographies of Booker T. Washington and Helen Keller exemplify how double consciousness can serve as a means of enfreakment. Further, all these texts are situated culturally by medicalizing a series of historical events, including specific lynchings, as well as laws that reconfigured urban landscapes. The final chapter focuses on early horror film, arguing that film became the new American sideshow and in the process changed the definition of freak to something far more monstrous. In short, this dissertation demonstrates how the freak show pervaded America at the turn of the twentieth century and turned the country into one large dime museum.
KEYWORDS: Disability Studies, American Literature, American Horror Film, Double Consciousness, Eugenics, Freaks and Freakishness

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By

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To my parents, Jim and Kathy Fairfield,
with love and gratitude.
Thank you for always believing.
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Changes in how Western culture has viewed the freak have frequently occurred in a series of what Stephen Jay Gould refers to in his studies on biological evolution as punctuated equilibria, significant changes that occur at specific historical moments as opposed to evolution that happens consistently over a series of generations. The earliest known example of a distinct cultural view of freaks comes from Ancient Greece, where they were believed to be diseased monsters who could curse any pregnant woman who looked upon one of them. For this reason, Plato suggested that the disabled be removed from society and relegated to “mysterious and unknown places” (150). This view of the physically deformed underwent a radical shift when early Christian doctrine declared disease and disability as means toward spiritual purification, as opposed to previous beliefs that saw them as a disgrace and a punishment for sin. This positive view of freaks underwent an additional radical shift during the sixteenth century, when theologians, most notably Martin Luther and John Calvin, constructed a cultural view of the freak as possessed by evil spirits. The physically disabled and deformed were subjected to torture and exorcisms in an attempt to cleanse their spirits. Eventually, freaks came to be seen in Western culture as sources of entertainment, derision, and pseudoscientific proof of a series of racist and sexist stereotypes. A primary example of this use of the physically aberrant is the display of Sarah Baartman, better known as the Hottentot Venus, in a Piccadilly Circus sideshow and, eventually, in the Musée de l’Homme between 1810 and 1815. Baartman was placed on display because of her abnormally large buttocks and genitalia. Onlookers viewed her as a source of entertainment and a target for ridicule, while noted anatomist Georges Cuvier wrote about Baartman as proof of the inherent hypersexuality in African women.

An additional shift in the freak’s cultural role occurred in Turn-of-the-Century America. From the 1880s to the 1920s, freaks were consistently ostracized from civic life and stigmatized as biological mistakes. Through this marginalization, freaks became the emblem for a series of regional and national anxieties, social movements, and social concepts. These issues included the Wounded South, white masculinity, double consciousness, the American eugenics movement, and American exceptionalism. As a result, white, able-bodied Americans enfreaked and shunned outsiders in relation to the period’s obsession with a standard of normalcy.

During this period, the freak included not only sideshow attractions, but all physically disabled Americans. The physically disabled created anxiety in a way that

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1 See Gould and Eldredge.
2 For historical overviews of disability, see Burch and Rembis; Longmore; Stiker; and Nielsen, A Disability History of the United States.
3 For further information on how the Ancient Greeks viewed disability, see Asma; Rose; and Stiker.
4 For further information on how Luther and Calvin saw the disabled, see Stiker.
5 For more on Sarah Baartman, see Crais and Scully; see also Holmes.
6 After conducting an autopsy on Baartman’s body, Cuvier wrote up his findings in Leçons d’anatomie comparée [30 Lessons in Comparative Anatomy], which would become his most famous book.
stemmed from a different source than other means of discrimination, such as racism and sexism. While white men have traditionally feared their social and economic status being usurped through the empowerment of women and minorities, the disabled have been shunned based on a different source of angst. The disabled do not engender the phobia that the able-bodied could possibly become subordinate to them, but instead the deep-seated fear that the able-bodied could become disabled themselves. While there was no chance of white men in Turn-of-the-Century America suddenly becoming a different gender or a different race, there has always been the possibility of becoming disabled or disfigured in an instant. When combined with the burgeoning eugenics movement and the increased emphasis placed on normalcy at the end of the nineteenth century, the freak symbolized the fears of what supposedly normal Americans could become and the possible tainting of uncontaminated white bloodlines.

Likewise, while the practice of displaying freaks goes back at least as far as the origins of the carnival, it too has taken on a variety of forms ranging from festivals to parades to public autopsies. During the turn of the century, these practices included such more traditional means as circuses, sideshows, and fairs, each of which experienced their golden age during this period. However, they also included lynchings and minstrel shows, both of which have traditionally been associated almost solely with race, as these practices became rituals that ultimately physically disfigured the victims or targets. Further, these means of display also simultaneously led to the freak becoming ostracized from mainstream society. This exclusion of the freak from most communities throughout the country can be seen not only in the customary practice of holding the display of freaks outside the boundaries of small towns and large cities, but also in legislation passed by over two dozen cities from Boston to Los Angeles that barred the disabled and the destitute from appearing in public. The eventual conflation of the disabled with African Americans and the lower classes resulted in the freak show being replaced by the rapidly growing film industry, particularly in the emergence of horror films and monster movies.

Moreover, the freak served as a symbol for Late-Nineteenth- and Early-Twentieth-Century America’s various cultural fears in both the literature and films of the era. Defined by Ellen Samuels in “Reading Race through Disability” as a process in which freaks are “placed outside the realm of signification, as reflectors rather than producers of meaning” (64), enfreakment played a significant role in the works of many of the era’s most famous writers, such as Jack London, William Dean Howells, and Helen Keller. Furthermore, many early horror films, particularly those directed by Tod Browning and those starring Lon Chaney, also reflect the period’s obsession with the freak. The central role of enfreakment in the horror film came with the release of Tod Browning’s controversial film *Freaks* in 1932. These cinematic freak shows and their obsession with the physically disabled and deformed ultimately gave birth to the Universal Studios monster movies in the 1930s. Through their equation of monstrosity and freakishness, early horror films ultimately became America’s primary freak show.

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7 For more information on the cultural role of the freak, see Bogdan, *Freak Show*; L. Davis, *Enforcing*; Fiedler, *Freaks*; Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*; and Goffman.
8 For further information on the display of freaks, see Adams; Bogdan, *Freak Show*; Fiedler, *Freaks*; and Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*.
9 See Schweik or Chapter 4.
supplanted sideshows, circuses, and fairs in cultural relevance, and became cultural representations of the burgeoning American eugenics movement. Since the subsequent chapters will all rely on knowledge of the American eugenics movement, it is essential to first discuss the background of eugenics and the role it played in Late-Nineteenth- and Early-Twentieth-Century America.

**Human Thoroughbreds: The American Eugenics Movement**

Originating in the 1880s, the worldwide eugenics movement found a fertile membership base among Americans, particularly the intellectual classes, by the turn of the twentieth century. Coined by Sir Francis Galton in *Inquiries into Human Faculty and Its Development* (1883), the term eugenics was derived from the Ancient Greek for “well born.” Ultimately, it designated a pseudoscience that entwined components of socioeconomics, philosophy, and biology (Black 9, 16) and became “scientific proof” that “validated” many white Americans’ anxieties about race and social power. In a speech given before the Sociological Society in London on May 16, 1904, Galton defined eugenics as “the science which deals with all influences that improve the inborn qualities of a race; also with those that develop them to the utmost advantage” (“Eugenics” 1). According to Galton, eugenics encouraged the development of admirable genetic traits through selective breeding to bring about “the improvement of the inborn qualities, or stock, of [a] human population” (1). Galton ended his speech by describing eugenics’ primary goal as bringing about “as many influences as can be reasonably employed, to cause the useful classes in the community to contribute more than their proportion to the next generation” (3; emphasis in original). Detractors scorned eugenics as no more legitimately scientific than such fads as phrenology¹⁰ and iridology¹¹. The many scientists and sociologists who supported it, however, saw eugenics as a scientific means to control the population, a way to engineer an ideal citizenry, and a concept that cast white, able-bodied men as a national norm. By falling outside of this norm, freaks became a symbol of national fears about what could ultimately happen to the bloodlines of those who met the national ideal without proper means of control. Similarly, the display of freakish bodies served as a warning of what could happen to America without the adoption of eugenic principles as part of our national ideology.

Galton’s work in eugenics originated out of his interest in Gregor Mendel’s study of the genetics of peas pods. He applied Mendel’s research to human beings in his collection of essays *Natural Inheritance* (1889). Initially interested in how physical traits were passed on genetically, Galton researched whether or not all components of intellect, personality, and moral character were passed down genetically. Inventing a research method that he dubbed “historiometry,” Galton obtained large quantities of data by examining the relatives of various degrees of eminent men. If abilities were hereditary, according to Galton, those same traits should be more prevalent in the descendants of

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¹⁰ The study of bumps and fissures in people’s skulls to determine their character. Based on the concepts that the brain was a series of mental organs with specific functions, that the size of each organ indicated its relative power or strength, and that the skull ossified over these organs, phrenology influenced early studies in neuroscience before being discredited by the late nineteenth century.

¹¹ The study of the patterns and colors of the iris to diagnose a person’s susceptibility to certain illnesses, to reflect a patient’s medical history, and to predict later health problems. It remained popular as a gauge of people’s systemic health until the mid-twentieth century.
those eminent men he studied than among the general population. Galton then began a study of twins who had been separated at birth, ultimately concluding that nature trumped nurture in determining a person’s abilities and character.

Galton hypothesized that “every person was the measurable and predictable sum of his ancestors’ immortal germ plasm” (Black 17). Consequently, Galton believed that encouraging the best classes of people to breed with one another would lead to an evolution of the average man. In “Restrictions in Marriage” (1909), he proposed a regulated marriage system that required those in the best classes to marry each other (50). However, while Galton strongly endorsed the regulation of marriage, he did not advocate the uglier practices later advocated by American eugenicists, including forced sterilization, coerced segregation, and ethnic cleansing.

Having garnered supporters from Britain’s intellectual elite, eugenics spread to other developed nations—including, most prominently, the United States. One of the earliest American advocates of eugenics, Victoria Woodhull, argued in her pamphlet The Rapid Multiplication of the Unfit (1891) that “if superior people are desired, they must be bred; and if imbeciles, criminals, paupers, and the otherwise unfit are undesirable they must not be bred” (n. pag.). John Harvey Kellogg echoed Woodhull’s comments, citing his desire to establish “a Race of Human Thoroughbreds” (431), a goal that would come to dominate the American eugenics movement and would establish the freak as the alternative to a country that practiced eugenics.

American eugenics remained a rather formless movement of widely dispersed followers until the turn of the twentieth century, when noted Harvard zoologist Charles Davenport and Henry Fairfield Osborn, director of the American Museum of Natural History, united eugenics as a legitimate science. This process coalesced with the founding of the Eugenics Records Office in 1910. Davenport and Osborn’s enthusiasm recruited several prominent followers, most notably Theodore Roosevelt, the epitome of American masculinity and progressivism, and Helen Keller, the face of disabled Americans. Unlike its British counterpart, however, the American eugenics movement took the concept of eugenics in a much uglier and more oppressive direction.

The cultural climate and sociological interests of American culture at the turn of the twentieth century soon perverted Galton’s initial premise. Between 1890 and 1920, 18 million immigrants passed through Ellis Island, most of them Germans, Jews, Russians, and Slavs. Despite the myth of the American “melting pot,” these groups found themselves ostracized, ghettoized, and victimized by prejudice and even occasional violence. This mistreatment came at the hands of white Americans who feared that these immigrants would take away their jobs and social status. Similar prejudice and violence was faced by Chinese Americans and by the influx of over 230,000 Japanese immigrants entering the United States through California between 1890 and 1920. Many white Americans viewed Asian immigrants, both Chinese and Japanese, as a threat to their jobs.

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12 British supporters of eugenics included H. G. Wells, George Bernard Shaw, and Winston Churchill.
13 Other American followers of eugenics included Alexander Graham Bell, Jack London, and Andrew Carnegie.
14 This influx ultimately led to the opening of Angel Island off the coast of San Francisco in 1910. During its fourteen years of operation, the facility unlawfully detained and deported the majority of Japanese immigrants.
and status, thereby triggering a mass cultural fear leading to their being commonly called the Yellow Peril. Between the fear of these immigrants and the bitterness toward African Americans in the Post-Reconstruction South, Turn-of-the-Century America was rife with both racial and national tensions. Such tensions escalated during the Panic of 1893, leading to additional resentment toward all non-white and/or non-native Americans. This resentment—along with a similar feeling toward other “undesirables,” including the poor, criminals, and those living in the nation’s most remote rural communities—catalyzed the eugenics movement by increasing its number of followers. Ultimately, these anxieties extended freakishness beyond its more traditional disability-based confines.

The inclusion of Appalachian and other rural Americans on the list of undesirables first manifested itself through such studies as Richard Louis Dugdale’s *The Jukes: A Study in Crime, Pauperism, Disease and Heredity* (1877) and Oscar Carleton McCulloch’s *The Tribe of Ishmael: A Study in Social Degradation* (1888). Both studies attempted to prove through genealogical evidence that rural citizens were biologically inferior and genetically prone to crime, imbecility, and debauchery. Mostly ignored at the time of their publication, they obtained intellectual validation during the 1890s as both Herbert Spencer’s theory of Social Darwinism and criminologists’ increased belief in a physical criminal type took hold in American culture. Dugdale vocalized the concerns of the burgeoning eugenics movement in an 1891 speech before the American Anthropological Association of Washington, in which he claimed that “The taint is in the blood and there is no royal touch which can expel it . . . Quarantine the evil classes as you would the plague” (Black 25). The movement to rid the nation of any and all so-called undesirables, including the chronically ill, the congenitally mutilated, and the genetically impure, had taken hold.

Studies of this nature reached their apex with the widespread publication of Henry Goddard’s *The Kallikak Family: A Study in the History of Feeblemindedness* (1913). Studying the family tree of a rural Virginia family he named the Kallikaks, Goddard used his book not just to present an example of inherited degeneracy, but also to issue a moral warning to America that allowing such families to continue breeding would spawn a racial and evolutionary crisis. Goddard traced the family’s tainted stock back to a Revolutionary War–era patriarch whom he named Martin Kallikak. Goddard claimed that Martin engaged in an illicit, extramarital affair with an unnamed, feebleminded girl and, thereby, “spawned a race of defectives” (103). Goddard further argued that the Kallikaks’ feeblemindedness cast a permanent stain on their lineage, claiming that genetics could no more change their stock to having a normal intellect than it “could change a red-haired stock into a black-haired stock” (109). Goddard reinforced this linking of physical enfreakment to limited intellect with doctored photos throughout the book. The alterations in family members’ brows, eyes, and other facial features made the family look dangerous, immoral, stupid, and most of all, freakish. These doctored photos and the accompanying genealogical data gave credence to the argument that some families came from immoral and inferior stock. Consequently, the presentation of Appalachian and other rural Americans found in studies like *The Kallikak Family* served as evidence for many eugenicists of the need for forced sterilization.

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15 This physical type included beady eyes and certain phrenological features, such as a low, sloping brow.
Many scholars primarily associate American endorsement of forced sterilization with Margaret Sanger and her efforts with the American Birth Control League in the 1920s. These associations come from such attitudes as Sanger proudly referring to lower classes as “human waste” and concurring with noted University of Chicago professor Lothrop Stoddard that “weeds should be exterminated” (160). Although Sanger was indeed an important figure in the forced sterilization movement, that movement already had a firm foothold in the United States by the time she rose to prominence. In 1910, the American Breeders’ Association adopted a resolution endorsing not just forced sterilization, but also euthanasia (Black 60). By the time the Supreme Court made its landmark 1927 decision in *Buck v. Bell*,¹⁶ which legalized forced sterilization, Indiana’s forced sterilization law was twenty-two years old. Furthermore, thirty-five additional states had forced sterilization laws either on the books or pending in the state legislature awaiting the court’s decision. When then–Associate Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes justified Carrie Buck’s immediate sterilization in the majority decision regarding *Buck v. Bell*, stating that “three generations of imbeciles are enough,” he already had a generation of precedence behind the decision.

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¹⁶ As of 2015, this decision has never been overturned. It was most recently challenged in the 2004 case *State of Wisconsin v. Schulpius*. 

Figure 1.1: Two images of members of the Kallikak family doctored by Goddard.
Figure 1.2: A traveling fair exhibit highlights the agenda of the American Breeders' Association. Such exhibits, which were often displayed in a fair's Science building, implicitly justified the exploitation and display of sideshow freaks on the same fair's midway.

The degree to which forced sterilization is emblematic of the larger issue of the freak in Early-Twentieth-Century America can be seen in the frequency with which it took place during the first quarter of the twentieth century. Surgeons performed 6,244 state-sanctioned sterilizations between 1905 and 1927, the era spanning passage of Indiana’s forced sterilization law and *Buck v. Bell* (Lombardo 60). This number breaks down to just over five procedures per week. Moreover, it comes to more than twice the number of lynchings recorded between 1882 and 1930. The large number of forced sterilizations illustrates an attempted eradication not only of a series of grotesque physical aberrations, but also of thousands of supposedly inferior bloodlines—bloodlines that eugenicists commonly saw as infecting the health of America’s genetic makeup.

Further, the procedures used in these operations suggest that surgeons were simultaneously controlling America’s genetic makeup and constructing freaks. Forced sterilizations most commonly took place in asylum operating rooms, with victims, particularly teenage victims, often being told that they were undergoing an appendectomy (Black 4). Surgeons rarely performed full castrations of male patients, thereby leaving a sizeable surgical scar as the only visible alteration to the patient’s body. The procedures, however, still marked both the patients and their bloodlines as genetic mistakes and left them straddling the boundary that separated citizens from outsiders. Further, these operations indentified subjects as representing classes of people who were flaws in the American bloodline. Thus, each victim helped define what it meant to be a hillbilly or to have a specific chronic illness.

The classes targeted for sterilization ran a wide gamut of social types that eugenicists viewed as introducing weaknesses into the American “race.” This wide spectrum of potential subjects extended freakishness into even broader social categories. The physically and mentally disabled, especially disabled teenagers, made up one of the leading groups of people targeted for the surgeon’s knife, with epileptics and those classed as feebleminded leading the pack. However, a vast number of disfigurements and diseases also made people candidates for sterilization, as did conditions as benign as
alcoholism or even left-handedness. People marked as incurable criminals also found themselves sterilized. However, as with other modes of enfreakment, most notably lynching, the crimes that led to sterilization varied widely from community to community and even from individual to individual. While some violent criminals underwent this procedure, so too did people convicted of lesser crimes, including vagrancy, truancy, and public intoxication. In fact, even unattended boys, especially in Appalachian communities, found themselves subject to sterilization (Black 4, 97, 121-2). Because of this wide spectrum of victims, coerced sterility expanded the classes of people believed to be subhuman.

By placing subjects in a liminal space between human and beast, eugenics took on a function similar to that of freak show proprietors showing their most feral and primitive exhibits reading, taking tea, or dressed up for high society. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that the same generation that saw the height of the freak show also saw a groundswell of support for eugenics and witnessed the advent of forced sterilization. Freak shows and eugenics both cordoned off the freakish and put them on display. Through bodily and social control, both freak shows and eugenics contained the national “nightmare of a body that is deformed, maimed, mutilated, broken, diseased” (L. Davis, Enforcing 5), whether that body was on display in a tent or marked for surgery.

**Freakery, Normalcy, and Racial Violence**

In *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (1996), Rosemarie Garland-Thomson argues that enfreakment “emerges from cultural rituals that stylize, silence, differentiate, and distance the persons whose bodies the freak-hunters or showmen colonize and commercialize” (“From Wonder” 10). Her perspective shows how racial violence, especially lynching, reflects the role that freaks and their public display played in Turn-of-the-Century America. Garland-Thomson argues further that “enfreakment elaborately foregrounds such bodily eccentricities; it also collapses all those differences into a ‘freakery,’ a single amorphous category of corporeal otherness” (10). In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, enfreakment provided a system of taxonomy for those marked by any form of perceived bodily difference, whether that classification involved race, disability, or any other form of otherness. Lynching became a mode of enfreakment by differentiating black bodies from white bodies, refashioning black bodies through mutilation, and colonizing black bodies through souvenir hunters and lynching photographers. Once a body had been controlled through enfreakment, Americans at the turn of the twentieth century exploited and silenced it by making it a visual spectacle. Through its public nature and the mutilation of its victims, lynching treats the enfreaked bodies of its victims in this fashion.

A person’s enfreakment becomes even more grotesque when opposed to the supposed “normalcy” of white, able-bodied Americans. Lennard Davis defines normalcy as “the political-institutional-judicial state that relies on the control and normalization of bodies” (*Bending* 107). While the word normal has a much older history, its use to signify “constituting, conforming to, not deviating or differing from, the common type or standard, regular, usual” entered the English language around 1840 (*Enforcing* 24). The practice of seeing people in terms of normalcy, as Davis defines it, became part of the public consciousness around 1860 (*Enforcing* 24). According to Davis, the rise of normalcy as a social construct corresponds with the rise of industrialization following
Reconstruction. That same period, however, also roughly corresponds with the enforcement of Jim Crow laws as well as the onset of the lynching era in 1882.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the terms citizen and worker became roughly synonymous with each other. This equation between normalcy and being part of the workforce led to bodies becoming “standardized, homogenized, normalized” (Bending 106). The resulting emphasis on normalcy and the inability of many disabled Americans to hold industrial jobs enfreaked their disability to a much stronger degree than in previous eras. Conversely, during this same era, the concept of double consciousness17 led to blackness and citizenship becoming polar binary opposites of one another. The burgeoning obsession many Americans had with being regarded as normal resulted in the populace striving to become the mythical average citizen—that is, white, able-bodied, and part of the workforce. At the turn of the twentieth century, normalcy became not only the defining characteristic of the quintessential American (Enforcing 26), but also a marker of what separated freaks from citizens. Thus, “a national physical type, a national ethical type, and an anti-national physical type had to be constructed” (Bending 106), a process that led to Americans developing a mental image of what normalcy, and therefore what an American, looked like. This fabricated, subjective ideal fostered the sense of double consciousness experienced by all those who deviated from this norm. Certainly, the disabled and ethnic minorities were viewed as deviant; however, as shown by the wide swath cut by eugenicists’ surgical knives, those who exhibited any form of aberrance, including those stained by geography, criminology, and poverty, also found themselves pigeonholed as abnormal. Moreover, many Americans displayed their own anxieties over whether or not they were statistical anomalies on this newly constructed bell curve18 of normalcy. Thus, much of the enfreakment that took place between 1880 and 1920 can be tied to many Americans’ desires to reassure themselves and others of their own normalcy, especially when compared to any of the various types of freaks.

Less than a generation after the concept of normalcy had become a fixed part of the national consciousness, freak shows and lynching both entered their respective golden ages. Both of these communal activities assured spectators of their own physical normalcy in comparison to the bodies on display. Moreover, the display and shaping of these bodies demonstrated how both sideshows and lynchings allowed normal citizens to control and contain freaks. Both of these carnivalesque activities served as different manifestations of the same cultural reverence for normalcy and justified the stigmatization of enfreaked bodies. These two grotesque forms of entertainment sought to contain the national “nightmare of a body that is deformed, maimed, mutilated, broken, diseased” (Enforcing 5), whether that body be under a circus tent or dangling from the end of a rope.

The onset of the lynching era a mere five years after the end of Reconstruction, therefore, exhibits the correlation between self-actualization and targeted violence. White Southerners’ mounting belief in a Wounded South coupled with resentment of the civil rights gains experienced by Southern blacks during Reconstruction resulted in an explosion of public violence against African Americans. This correlation between

17 Discussed in detail in Chapter 3.
18 The rise of the concept of the bell curve also dates to this period.
disabled whiteness and displays of mutilated African-American bodies connects Turn-of-the-Century America’s use of the freak to the rise of both eugenics and public, racial violence during this same period. Mark Seltzer posits that by the dawn of the twentieth century, wounds began to symbolize the “stigma of the everyday openness of every body” (2). This perception of mangled bodies as evidence of stigmatization motivated the increased legalized control of crippled and non-white bodies during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This control came through the passage of local, state, and federal laws that connected being white and able-bodied with citizenship, including legislation that relocated the congenitally disabled and that sanctioned segregation of African Americans. Through this weaving together of legal and violence-based practices, white men sought to remove freaks and, by extension, human frailty from society.

Beyond being riddled with grisly and heinous details, lynching contains many of the key elements that marked not just it, but also freak shows as a whole, as rituals in Late-Nineteenth- and Early-Twentieth-Century America. Defining a ritual as “a ceremony, one which by countless repetitions has made it traditional among a given group of people or within a given community” (Harris 11), Trudier Harris sees these repetitions as “homage to certain beliefs that are vital to the community” (11). While Harris sees lynching rituals as a reassertion of white supremacy and a marking of black inferiority, she also sees them as whites enforcing segregation by denying African Americans access to whiteness or any aspect of the white world (11). According to Harris, “to violate the inviolable”, as in the case of a black “who touched a white woman or became mayor of a town, is taboo” (11). Such exertions of racial equality “upset the white world view or conception of the universe” (11-12). As a result, if whites wished to “exorcise the evil and restore the topsy-turvy world to its rightful position, the violator had to be symbolically punished” (12). Moreover, such punishment “becomes communal because the entire society has been threatened; thus the entire community must act to put down the taboo” (12). For this reason, “various concepts, not individuals, destroy black victims” (12). Focusing on concepts leading to bodily destruction led to lynching victims’ bodies being publicly mangled, castigated, and displayed as punishment for the victim having deviated from some communal norm regarding how blacks should conduct themselves. When combined with the popularity of eugenics, the display of a mutilated or burned body represented control not just over the victim, but over all African Americans. Ultimately, this process shows how Southern communities saw blackness as a sign of freakishness and reflects the carnival atmosphere that accompanied many lynchings.

For example, a British reporter investigating a lynching in an unrevealed Southern community inquired as to what specific crime was being avenged, only to be informed that such matters were “irrelevant” and that “no particular crime was being avenged” (“A London Diary” 388). Rather, “[t]he Negro population was being warned never to forget that the colored man in the South is still a slave, that between him and the white man there can be no law, no claim to justice” (388). This example couches lynching in terms of an almost shamanistic channeling of white power and a cultural tradition, thereby revealing claims of justice-serving to be mere subterfuge. It demonstrates white citizens not only reveling in the display of black bodies, but also determining the line between humanity and freakishness. Lynchings, such as the one reported here, can happen only in a culture that sees blackness as a natural deviation to be eliminated and that rallies around the image of physically aberrant bodies. This view of aberrant bodies reflects the identity
politics in terms of race, masculinity, and social class in Late-Nineteenth- and Early-Twentieth-Century America.

The Great White Hope: White Masculinity and Disability
This connection between aberrant bodies and identity politics will be even further explored in Chapter 3 as part of a larger discussion that treats double consciousness as a lens for examining not only racial identity but also disability-based identity. As discussed above, enfreakment has been defined as a process in which the freak is “placed outside the realm of signification, as reflectors rather than producers of meaning” (Samuels, Fantasies 64). This definition corresponds with W. E. B. Du Bois’ vision of double consciousness19 and its assertion that whites, not blacks, defined blackness, usually in terms of physical aberrations and particularly damaging stereotypes. Moreover, double consciousness also deals with the idea of African Americans having a split identity that forces them to identify either as blacks or as Americans but prohibits them from being both simultaneously. This aspect of double consciousness can be extended to an examination of the incongruities of developing a personal identity versus the construction of a public persona that marked the dawn of the twentieth century. The separation of being black and being American is but one instance of what double consciousness demonstrates in a broader sense: the way that Turn-of-the-Century America constructed freaks. Extending double consciousness into further arenas of otherness beyond race—in this case, disability—shows one of the tools used to enfreak legions of Americans who fell below the eugenic ideal.

Furthermore, double consciousness reflects the methods used by many Americans to alter their public identities to engender public acceptance for themselves despite their respective handicap or race. A primary example of this process involves Helen Keller and Booker T. Washington constructing public personas for themselves in their respective autobiographies, The Story of My Life and Up from Slavery. The respective images Keller and Washington created for themselves of a brilliant, perpetually happy cripple and a charismatic Uncle Tom conflicted with their private politics. Examples where they strayed from these public facades and acted according to their own ethos include Keller speaking out against World War I and Washington accepting Theodore Roosevelt’s invitation to dine at the White House. White America’s scathing response left Keller and Washington excoriated, caricaturized, and ostracized from many corners of polite society and revealed the role that the freak played in the identity politics of double consciousness at the turn of the twentieth century. The conjunction of enfreakment and double consciousness shows how just like African Americans, disabled Americans had their identities defined for them by the able-bodied and were labeled as either freaks or Americans, but never both, based on how they presented themselves publicly.

This connection between double consciousness and enfreakment shows itself through other forms of identity, particularly the view of white masculinity between the 1880s and the 1920s. The veneration of white masculinity as a cardinal virtue by Americans during this period included such things as Theodore Roosevelt’s promotion of muscular Christianity, the birth of college football, and the cultural embracing of

19 Du Bois first discussed this concept in an Atlantic Monthly article entitled “Strivings of the Negro People” (1897); he discussed it at much more length in the essay “Of Our Spiritual Strivings” found in The Souls of Black Folk (1903).
primitivism. Further, beginning in the 1880s and continuing through the 1920s, Americans distinguished between masculinity and manliness. This differentiation between the two led to an explosion of white men being diagnosed with neurasthenia. This sudden epidemic of men with decreased masculinity led both to a lack of masculinity being diagnosed as a disability and to white men feeling crippled through their perceived emasculation. This national sense of disabled whiteness particularly applied it to two specific cultural moments: (1) the coinciding of the lynching era with the emergence of the Wounded South in which Southerners experienced a self-imposed sense of collective disability following Reconstruction and (2) the racial crisis experienced by whites nationally following Jack Johnson becoming the first black heavyweight champion of the world. Both of these events will be examined in detail and connected to Jack London’s *The Abysmal Brute* in Chapter 2. For now, however, a broader exploration of them will suffice.

Losing the Civil War and being occupied by the Union army during Reconstruction left Southern whites both physically and psychologically disabled. Both wounded Confederate veterans and African Americans pushing for social and economic equality symbolized this collective sense of disability and resulted in Southern white men losing their sense of masculinity. The perception of disabled and emasculated Southerners as freaks provides a means for examining the rise of lynching during this period, especially the 1899 lynching of Sam Hose in Newnan, Georgia, and adds disability to the more traditional lenses used in discussing lynching, such as race and economic status. The particularly brutal nature of this lynching, in which Hose was flayed, mutilated, and ultimately burned alive, reveals the ways in which Georgian whites used it as a means of restoring their own sense of physical and social prowess. When combined with its carnivalesque atmosphere of exuberant spectators, lynching, especially that of Sam Hose, was a ritual used to construct freaks out of its victims and a particularly macabre example of the freak show that extended beyond the midway.

The ascension of Jack Johnson to the heavyweight championship of the world triggered a similar anxiety among white men about their own masculinity. With most Americans viewing the heavyweight champion as the manliest man on the planet during the opening decades of the twentieth century, Johnson’s 1908 victory over Tommy Burns triggered a fear that white American men were weakening through a pollution of their bloodlines. By the time Jack London christened former champion Jim Jeffries “The Great White Hope” prior to a 1910 title bout between Jeffries and Johnson, many white American men felt that the redemption of white masculinity depended on Johnson losing his title to a white challenger. The presentation of Johnson as a freak in the press leading up to his fight with Jeffries showed how freakishness and eugenics combined to play a prominent role in the race- and masculinity-laced anxieties of white men in the years leading up to World War I.

**Human Weeds: Civic Boundaries and Enfreakment**

In addition to symbolizing threats to identity and normalcy in terms of physical ability, whiteness, and masculinity, the freak also represented how Americans constructed civic and social boundaries from the 1880s through the 1920s. Many American communities during this timeframe drew their boundaries using the concept of “The City on the Hill,” which originated from John Winthrop’s 1630 sermon “A Model of Christian Charity” given aboard the *Arbella* as it headed for the Massachusetts Bay Colony. In his sermon,
Winthrop referenced Jesus’ “Sermon on the Mount” to give birth to the concept that would eventually lead to American exceptionalism. While discussions of “The City on the Hill” applied to the late nineteenth century typically focus on small Southern communities, the concept also symbolizes the ghettoizing of the undesirable classes in the urban centers of the North, particularly New York, Boston, and Chicago, as will be discussed in depth in Chapter 4 through a closer examination of the so-called Ugly Laws and the novels of William Dean Howells.

This segregation of disabled, non-white, and poor Americans from the supposedly normal went from eugenic theory to legal practice beginning in the 1880s. The drawing of geographical boundaries between the normal and the freaks came about when many Northern cities instituted and rigorously enforced unsightly beggar ordinances, more commonly called Ugly Laws. First passed in Chicago and New York before spreading to the prairies of the Midwest and the burgeoning cities of the West, these laws prohibited anyone who was visibly handicapped, deformed, or destitute from appearing in public. Police arrested violators, who were subsequently sent to jail, the asylum, or the almshouse by the courts. When combined with already-enforced racial segregation laws, the Ugly Laws eugenically cleansed the cities that passed them. These cities were then socially reconstructed so that they each had a closed nucleus that was dominated by whiteness and normalcy and that was then surrounded by outposts, each populated primarily by its own variety of freak. Essentially, those who were physically aberrant and impoverished found themselves either pushed to their own island communities on the outskirts of the city or walled off from the rest of the city by being placed in medical, psychiatric, and correctional institutions. Therefore, these laws resulted in a civic landscape that was similar to fairs and carnivals, which limited freaks to their own exhibits that dotted the midway and surrounded the more respectable portions of the fair.

In addition to establishing civic boundaries, the freak also symbolized the drawing of social boundaries among the elite classes of Boston and New York. The enfreakment of social outsiders manifested itself particularly through the eugenics-laced language used by members of Society to describe outsiders. The frequent use of terms like “weeds” and “savages” in the social discourse of the period clearly reflects the language used by eugenicists to describe the “unfit.” The enfreakment of social outsiders can be seen in the novels of William Dean Howells, particularly *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885) and *A Modern Instance* (1882). While Howells’ novels are more frequently discussed in terms of their treatment of capitalism and divorce, they also spend significant time dealing with the freak. Howells’ novels deal with freakishness both through their frequent inclusion of cripples and through their discussion of a rigid social hierarchy. A prime example of Howells extending the symbol of the freak into the social arena involves the failure of self-made millionaire Silas Lapham to join respectable society, despite his having more wealth than any of the social elite. This rejection stems both from Lapham’s rural upbringing and from his money coming through such vulgar means as mining and making oil paint. As the novel progresses, Howells presents Society as an institution that is based not on economics, but rather on genetics. Consequently, Howells’ novels parallel elite, white, Northern Society’s enfreakment of social outcasts with the rejection of the disabled found in the Ugly Laws and the platform of the eugenics movement.
The New Freak Show: The Rise of Horror Cinema

Enfreakment and the display of freaks gained a new outlet through the invention and rise in popularity of motion pictures. The rise of the cinematic freak show will form the basis of Chapter 5, particularly through an exploration of film as a means for presenting exoticism and grotesquity. From their earliest days, films focused on showing the exotic in a variety of ways—for instance, by exposing viewers to faraway locations, the lives of royalty, and aberrant social behavior. An example of a film displaying what would have been perceived as abnormal behavior can be found in the early short The Gay Brothers (1895), which shows two men slow dancing and kissing. These early documentary shorts soon focused on grotesque material: examples include Electrocuting an Elephant (1903) and Searching Ruins for Dead Bodies (1900). Likewise, once motion pictures began telling fictional narratives, horror films that focused on showcasing the freakish and displaying aberrant bodies quickly became one of the industry’s most popular genres. Early horror shorts of this type include Francesco Bertolini’s Dante’s Inferno (1911), D. W. Griffith’s The House of Darkness (1913), and the Thomas Edison–produced Frankenstein (1910). However, it is the 1908 short The Thieving Hand that best exemplifies the early horror short film’s role as a means of enfreakment. The film tells the story of an amputee who purchases a prosthetic arm formerly belonging to a thief from a pawnshop. After putting it on, the amputee finds himself compelled to steal against his own conscious desires. Ultimately, he returns the arm to the pawnshop, choosing to live life as a freak. By showing the arm as controlling his actions, the film not only suggests that body parts, even prosthetic ones, take on the moral traits of their first owner, but also suggests a direct connection between disability and moral degradation. Moreover, the man becomes a criminal and an outsider only once he attempts to fit in by purchasing the arm in the first place. Having attempted to hide his disability and pass as normal, the amputee is punished for trying to rise above his inherent freakishness. The collection of freakish and grotesque material found in an average trip to the movies turned the early movie industry into a modernized version of the midway or ten-in-one of previous generations.

Once directors began shooting feature-length films, horror films remained a favorite among audiences. At first, many of the horror films that were most popular with early audiences came from European studios. Examples of foreign horror films that found success in America include F. W. Murnau’s Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror (1922), Robert Wiene’s The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (1920), Victor Sjöström’s The Phantom Carriage (1921), and Benjamin Christensen’s pseudo-documentary Häxan: Witchcraft through the Ages (1922). However, American horror films also found traction with viewers, as in the case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (1920) featuring John Barrymore in the lead. Whereas European silent horror films focused on psychological terror, American silent horror films focused on the horrors of aberrant bodies and

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20 The ten-in-one was a sideshow attraction that allowed patrons to view ten freaks under a single tent for one price. Each exhibit was cordoned off in its own booth and exposed to the crowd only when it was its turn to be shown.

21 For a more extensive history of silent horror films, see Haberman; see also Kinnard.

22 This is one of seven silent film versions of Robert Louis Stevenson’s famous novella Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Other versions were made in 1908, 1909, 1911, twice in 1913, and one other time in 1920 beyond the one discussed here.
associated disability and deformity with evil. While bodily based horror dotted the American silent horror film landscape, it was the films starring Lon Chaney and those directed by Tod Browning that most frequently equated freakishness with monstrosity. Chaney starred in over 150 films during the 1920s. His reputation for using makeup, physical contraptions, prosthetics, and his own contortionist skills to create a host of grotesque characters earned him the nickname “The Man of 1,000 Faces.” Examples of films in which Chaney played disabled or malformed characters include The Miracle Man (1919), Flesh and Blood (1922), The Shock (1923), and London after Midnight (1927). Chaney’s most notable roles, however, involved figures whose disability forced them into ostracization and ultimately led to them being labeled as monsters and/or forced them into a life of criminal behavior. This theme dominates each of Chaney’s three most famous and popular films: The Penalty (1920), in which he plays a double amputee who has no legs, and both The Hunchback of Notre Dame (1923) and The Phantom of the Opera (1925), in which he plays the title roles. Chaney’s financial success attests to his immense popularity with the American public. Twice he had the highest-grossing film of the year, with Hunchback in 1923 and again with Phantom in 1925. Further, he was the highest-grossing film star of 1928, outdrawing such popular stars as Douglas Fairbanks, Mary Pickford, Buster Keaton, and Charlie Chaplin. At the time of his premature death in 1929, Chaney had supplanted such previous sideshow attractions as the Missing Link and the Wild Men of Borneo as America’s most popular gaffed freak.²³

Tod Browning’s silent horror films also enjoyed financial success during the 1920s by focusing on the freakish. Although he was best known as the director of Dracula (1931), Browning’s most popular silent films regularly took place in carnivals, circuses, and other similar places of entertainment and connected the freakish with the macabre. Many featured Chaney, who worked with Browning on ten films. Examples of such films, each of which starred Chaney, include West of Zanzibar (1928), The Blackbird (1926), and most notably, The Unknown (1927).²⁴ Browning continued to connect freakishness with criminality in his early talkies. However, the horror film reached its apogee as a freak show with the release of Browning’s highly controversial Freaks (1932), which starred many of the most famous sideshow attractions from the previous generation. Circus freaks who starred in the film included Prince Randian (the Living Torso), Johnny Eck (the Half Boy), and Pip and Zip (the Wild Aztec Children). The film is essentially broken into two halves. The first half features each of the sideshow acts showing off their freakishness and the individual routines that had made them famous.²⁵ The rest of the film deals with the freaks getting revenge on Cleopatra, a trapeze artist who tricked Hans, a midget,²⁶ into marrying her for his money and soon attempted to kill him off. As the film nears its conclusion, we see the freaks each

²³ The term gaffed freaks applies to normal-looking people who have been dressed and altered to look freakish, in contrast to people who have come by their freakishness through birth or accident.
²⁴ Additionally, Browning and Chaney worked together on The Human Duck, a film that was scrapped by the studio before it could be completed. Browning, however, later applied the central premise of that film to the ending of Freaks (1932) by having the freaks turn Cleopatra into the Human Duck.
²⁵ An example of this type of routine is Prince Randian rolling and lighting a cigarette despite not having any arms or legs.
²⁶ In “Spurs,” the original story on which Freaks was based, this character is referred to as a dwarf. In Freaks, he is referred to as a midget. Throughout the dissertation, I continue this pattern.
creeping through the darkness and crawling through the mud, knives and other weapons flashing, toward Cleopatra’s tent, where they ultimately turn her and her scheming boyfriend Hercules into freaks themselves. Upon the film’s release, local censorship boards across the country quickly banned it from being shown, citing the actors within it as contrary to local decency standards. In *Kingdom of Shadows*, Bret Wood’s 1998 documentary on the rise of the horror film, narrator Rod Steiger claims that “[a] monster isn’t really a monster until it’s been put on display,” a sentiment that was reflected in 1930s horror films, including *King Kong* (1933), *Island of Lost Souls* (1932), and most famously the Universal Monster movies.27 The infamous status cast upon *Freaks* illustrates that by the early 1930s, a shift had begun in the cultural perception of the disabled. The freak had returned to its Ancient Greek roots and become a monster once more.

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27 The term Universal Monster series most commonly refers to the following films: *Frankenstein* (1931), *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935), *Dracula* (1931), *The Invisible Man* (1933), *The Mummy* (1932), *The Wolf Man* (1941), and *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954). However, Universal made a total of 31 films featuring these monsters. Further, there are those who also include *The Phantom of the Opera* (1925) in this series.
Chapter 2  “A Carnival of Blood and Lust”:
Masculinity, Disability, and the Lynching of Sam Hose

In the opening moments of Jack London’s 1913 novel *The Abysmal Brute*, fight promoter Sam Stubener recalls having once received “a razor strop made from the skin of a lynched negro” (3) in the mail. While the strop symbolically foreshadows Pat Glendon, the novel’s protagonist, being exploitatively commercialized for his hulk-like physique, it also serves as a point of contrast for the perception of physical prowess along racial lines. Glendon’s whiteness casts his imposing size and his backwoods origins as the quintessential embodiment of what Late-Nineteenth-Century American manhood was supposed to be. Although the newspapers quickly dub him an “abysmal brute,” a moniker that Glendon retains throughout his in-ring career, he finds himself neither feared nor derisively gazed at by boxing crowds, but instead beloved by the hordes of white men who attend his fights. In fact, his towering stature and ability to knock out all comers with one punch directly cause Glendon to achieve near mythological status among Americans as a latter-day Paul Bunyan, fresh from the forests of Northern California. Further, Glendon proves his nickname to be ironic, or at least limited to his in-ring persona, through both his habit of attending academic lectures prior to his fights and his romancing of Maud Sangster, a journalist. This combination of hypermasculinity and Victorian manhood shape Glendon, according to Jack London’s own standards, as a paragon of manliness. By constructing Glendon as a white man who possesses physical prowess and harnesses his ancestral brutishness, yet hones his intellectual and cultural sides through novels, lectures and the theater, London creates an avatar for what the ideal American man looked like to public figures ranging from educator G. Stanley Hall to President Theodore Roosevelt.

In addition to creating a character who embodied American masculinity, London also intended for Glendon roughly to represent Jim Jeffries, who had lost in his bid to unseat Jack Johnson as the heavyweight champion of the world in 1910.1 During a series of editorials leading up to the fight, London dubbed Jeffries “The Great White Hope” and celebrated his strength as proof of white civilization’s superiority. Conversely, those same editorials referred to Johnson as “the son of a slave” and an “Ethiopian,” while highlighting Johnson’s physical strength as savage, primitive, and a threat to whites everywhere, especially should he win. It is this contrasting vision of black masculinity that London highlights through the image of the barber’s strop that opens the novel. The skin of the lynched Negro that the strop is made out of represents both the ability and the imperativeness of whites controlling black physical prowess. While London never specifies why the unnamed victim had been lynched and ultimately flayed, the specifics are immaterial. Whether accused of “the usual crime”,2 murder, or simply arguing with a white man, the victim was guilty of the same “crime”: using his masculinity so that his superior strength resulted in a black body overpowering a white one. While the victim

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1 Coaxed out of retirement, Jeffries left his job as an alfalfa farmer to fight Johnson in what would be dubbed the “Battle of the Century.” Staged on July 4, 1910, in Reno, Nevada, the fight ended in the fifteenth round when Johnson knocked Jeffries out. Race riots broke out across the South the next day in response to Johnson’s victory. For a more detailed account of the fight and the racially fueled campaign around it, see Bederman.

2 Rape was often referred to as “the usual crime” in newspaper accounts of lynching.
may have been called an “abysmal brute” or something similar by the journalist covering his death, that same epithet likely would not have carried the same ironic connotations as it did when London bestowed it on Pat Glendon.

Further, by having the lynched negro’s skin turned into a barber strop as opposed to a pair of shoes, London demonstrates that the need for whites to control black physicality went beyond objectification. By turning the lynching victim into a barber’s strop, an object presumably originally used by a white man as a tool of his trade, London demonstrates the commercial exploitation of lynched bodies. While Glendon’s aberrant strength lionizes him, the barber’s strop in question shows how the white community reacts to physical prowess from an African-American man, whether he be Jack Johnson or an unnamed lynching victim. Rather than being lauded, black physicality must be controlled, destroyed, publicly displayed, and/or commercialized as a vanquished monster. The juxtaposition of the barber’s strop and the letter that first introduces the reader to Glendon as “the hope of the white race” highlights the ways in which the bodily exploitation of both men strengthens white men’s perception of their own masculinity. London shows how the lynching of an anonymous black provides a point of pride that models what it means to be a true American man as surely as a dominant young Glendon mowing his way through the parade of ethnic caricatures who serve as his first opponents. London demonstrates how, for many Americans during this period, brutality, whether in the form of a knockout or a lynching, is at the center of any ritual that produces any sort of white hope and that provides the path toward redemption for white masculinity.

This same connection between hypermasculinity, physical fitness, and nationalism mirrors the construct of the Wounded South discussed in Chapter 1. Lynching takes the national emphasis on whiteness, masculinity, and corporeal normalcy promoted through the eugenics movement and injects it with a particularly strongly charged brand of regionalism. Lynching was not so much about punishing black transgressions as it was about resurrecting the South from its self-perceived status as a cesspool of crippled white masculinity and restoring Southern pride. Through sustained analysis of the 1899 lynching of Sam Hose, this chapter explores how the Turn-of-the-Century South used lynching as a tool to reconstruct its white men so that they projected the type of physical vitality that period standards of masculinity expected of American men. However, it also shows how the South used lynching as a means for healing the physical and psychological mutilations left by the Civil War and Reconstruction and for returning the region to the glorious heights of the Antebellum Period.

“The Georgia Exhibition”: The Lynching of Sam Hose

On April 23, 1899, W. E. B. Du Bois, carrying a letter of introduction in his pocket, was walking quickly through downtown Atlanta on his way to a scheduled meeting with Joel Chandler Harris, editor of the Atlanta Constitution, when he received news of what he would later term “the event that pulled me off my feet” (qtd. in Dray, At the Hands 12). Du Bois, who was heading to meet Harris with facts that he hoped would prevent the

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3 On April 2, 1881, George Parrott was lynched in Rawlins, Wyoming. Following the lynching, his skin was made into a pair of shoes and his skull was turned into an ashtray.

4 Glendon’s early fights include bouts against men named Chub Collins, Roughhouse Kelly, and the Flying Dutchman.
lynching of an itinerant farm worker named Sam Hose scheduled for later that day in nearby Coweta County, stopped dead in his tracks when he learned that a nearby grocery store had placed the knuckles of the very man he had been hastening to save on display in its front window. Du Bois initially reacted by turning around and walking back home dejectedly, but the Sam Hose lynching would prove to be a watershed moment that kindled his inner fire to fight passionately for civil rights and an end to lynching that would burn for the rest of his life. Further, it proved once and for all to Du Bois that “complete scientific detachment in such a South was impossible” (qtd. in Dray 15). Over fifty years before Emmett Till’s 1955 murder for allegedly whistling at a white woman in Money, Mississippi, sparked the civil rights movement, Sam Hose’s gruesome lynching would catalyze the fight against the Jim Crow South.

The entire affair had begun nearly two weeks earlier, on April 12, 1899, in Newnan, Georgia, when Hose approached his boss, Alfred Cranford, at the end of the workday. Accounts of Hose’s purpose in seeking Cranford out are split between Hose requesting the following day off to visit his sick mother and Hose demanding that Cranford pay him unpaid wages from the previous month. Whatever the cause, Cranford became enraged, secured a gun and threatened to shoot Hose down where he stood. Hose responded by taking in his hand the axe that he had previously been working with and throwing it in self-defense. After seeing the axe strike and kill Cranford instantly, Hose fled in terror, thereby beginning a manhunt that would leave the entire state of Georgia riveted, a manhunt that would end when brothers J. B. and J. L. Jones captured Hose in Marshallville, Georgia, on April 23 and returned him by train to Newnan.

While Leon Litwack’s essay “Hellhounds” uses reports from an investigation into the lynching to confirm the above account of Hose’s crime, newspapers across the South, particularly in Georgia, fanned the flames of white outrage by printing a series of increasingly lurid accounts that read like potboilers. The specific details vary in terms of gruesomeness, but the basic sequence remains consistent. According to these fictional accounts, Hose crept into Alfred and Mattie Cranford’s home while they were having dinner, brandished an axe, and used it to bludgeon Mr. Cranford’s brains out at the dinner table. Hose then turned to the Cranfords’ young children and physically manhandled two of them, permanently disfiguring the older boy and dashing the baby to the floor with enough force to knock the infant unconscious. Finally, Hose punctuated his crime by assaulting and raping Mrs. Cranford on the floor, with several accounts suggesting that he did so in front of the children and in the midst of her husband’s blood and brain matter. Later that evening, according to these accounts, a battered and frenzied Mrs. Cranford arrived with her children at the home of her father-in-law and recounted this version of events to him. Although unconfirmed and untrue, the visceral accounts whipped the entire state into a frenzy. By the time the train bearing Hose pulled into Newnan later that day, a mob of thousands, including two train cars full of spectators from Atlanta, greeted the train to take control of Hose and ensure that he met “justice” at their hands.

While the sheriff initially took charge of Hose and took him to the local jail, these proceedings served as mere formalities. The mob quickly took control of Hose and led him on a procession through town, making stops for Mrs. Cranford to identify him and

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5 The knuckles in question were actually pig knuckles and one of dozens of similar displays across Atlanta that had been designed as a crude joke. The real knuckles were on display in Newnan, Georgia, where the lynching had taken place.
for worshipers at Sunday church service to come out and cheer, before reaching a field just outside of town. There, the mob tortured and mutilated Hose, severing his ears, his fingers, and his penis from his body. Then, they flayed large chunks of flesh off of his face and doused him in kerosene. Finally, they tied him to a nearby tree, surrounded his feet with kindling, and rushed forward to cut away further souvenirs from Hose’s body before finally burning him to death. Hose’s screams and pleas for mercy throughout were met with laughter and derision. Once Hose was dead, additional souvenirs were sold as the heart and liver were cut into pieces, thereby bringing a close to what the Atlanta Constitution would dub “The Georgia Exhibition.” According to Edwin Arnold, some of the pieces of Hose’s body remained in circulation among locals as recently as the 1970s. Because of the nature of the alleged offense and the gruesomeness of the lynching itself, Hose’s lynching is emblematic of a burgeoning crisis in American, and particularly Southern, manhood at the turn of the twentieth century.

“The Battle of the Century”: Race and Masculinity
Before we analyze Hose’s lynching, we need to examine the shifting standards for masculinity from this period and the role those standards played in American society, beginning with a look at the event that inspired London’s novel The Abysmal Brute: the Johnson–Jeffries fight. Having gradually built in fervency over the 1890s and the first decade of the twentieth century, the violent need for white Americans to recapture their manhood through the physical domination of a physically impressive black body reached an apogee during the buildup to and aftermath of boxer Jack Johnson’s defense of his world heavyweight championship against retired former champion Jim Jeffries on July 4, 1910. Ever since Johnson had won the title by thrashing and ultimately knocking out Tommy Burns in 1908, white Americans had been anxiously clamoring for a white man to defeat Johnson and reclaim the title of “Most Powerful Man in the World” for the white race. Johnson’s victory not only revealed why Burns’ agreement to fight Johnson was the first title shot granted to a black fighter since John L. Sullivan won the title in 1882 and announced that he would “never fight a Negro,” but also crippled an entire race through the images flickering on movie screens across the nation of a muscular black man physically dominating the most physically impressive white men that the nation had to offer. Johnson had become a threat not just to future title contenders, but to an entire race’s masculinity.
Finally, in April 1909, newspapers across the nation began publicly beseeching Jeffries to leave his alfalfa farm behind and return to the ring, not for his own glory, but to save an entire nation of white Americans. The more famous of the public pleas to Jeffries to return to the ring and vanquish the black villain include a letter from Jack London to the New York Herald telling Jeffries that it’s up to him to rescue the white race and a cartoon run by the Chicago Tribune showing a small blonde girl begging the former champion to return to the ring. Taken as a whole, this public courting of Jeffries depicts him as a white Super-man\(^6\) whose country, from an author whose stories epitomized the glories of white manhood to the stereotypical little girl, needed him to emerge from the shadows and defeat the black monster who menaced both contemporary whiteness and the future health of the race. Moreover, Johnson became an almost

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\(^6\) When referring to Super-man here, I mean the concept of a racially superior being favored by later-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century eugenicists, not the caped superhero created by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster in 1933.
minstrelized threat to whites, a status that would be confirmed on the day of the fight when promoters played “All Coons Look Alike to Me” as his entrance music to the fight.

Written for the minstrel circuit in 1895 by Kentucky native Ernest Hogan, “All Coons Look Alike to Me” gave birth to both ragtime and what would become known as “coon songs,” songs that relied primarily on racist epithets and stereotypes. The first, and most widely available at the time, recorded version of the song was a 1902 recording by Arthur Collins, a notable white performer who worked primarily in blackface. The lyrics describe a woman who leaves her man for a wealthier beau, reasoning that “All Coons Look Alike to Me.” While the decision to play this song could have been based on the lyrics as a jibe at Johnson, suggesting that his white wife stayed with him only because of his money, the decision to play it likely had more to do with the status this particular song had taken on by the time of the fight. By 1910, “All Coons” had given birth to hundreds of imitations and parodies, many of which contained far more racist material than it did, and had become widely known as the grandfather of the coon song. Many of these songs used a similar cakewalk-style rhythm to such a degree that playing one of these songs would invariably bring up references to scores of others. Further, by 1910, the song’s title had become a common racist phrase throughout New York City, used by whites as justification for racial violence.

This racially charged conception of both Johnson and Jeffries gained even further social currency when a Jack London editorial in the June 1910 issue of Current Literature dubbed Johnson the “Negroes’ Deliverer” and knighted Jeffries the “Hope of the White Race” (“Review” 606). These epithets laid out the stakes of what was clearly no ordinary prizefight. The two combatants were not just fighting for a belt or a title; they were fighting for their individual races and the social positioning of those two races. Indeed, the fate of civilization itself was purportedly riding on the results. The tenor of the country’s anticipation of the fight can be found in the fact that in the two weeks leading up to the fight, 500 journalists who would be covering the fight live in Reno submitted copy daily, a significant commitment in that era in terms of both number of reporters and time devoted to daily coverage of a single sporting event. Further, the bulk of this material was race-baiting propaganda designed to assure the white race that Jeffries would win and social order would soon be restored.

On the day of the fight, normal Fourth of July activities came to a halt as thousands upon thousands of American men crowded into ballparks, theaters, and auditoriums across the nation to hear the live reports of the fight from the wire services, while tens of thousands congregated outside newspaper offices, eager to hear the results, including over ten thousand men gathering outside the offices of the Atlanta Constitution. The combination of tension and spectacle produced by the fight rendered it a sensation whose symbolism made it appropriate that it was being staged on Independence Day. In the end, the fight itself was rather anticlimactic: Johnson brutalized Jeffries, retaining his title in a bloody romp. The man viewed by whites as a black beast had reigned supreme, leaving the Great White Hope a broken body sprawled across the canvas. The Chicago Defender, a popular black newspaper at the time, proclaimed Johnson the first African American to hold a claim to the title of “the best man in the world” (qtd. in Bederman 2).

While black Americans celebrated Johnson’s victory, white Americans erupted in a furious outpouring of violence. According to Gail Bederman, following the fight, “race riots broke out in every Southern State, as well as Illinois, Missouri, New York, Ohio,
Pennsylvania, Colorado, and the District of Columbia” (2-3). Although there were isolated incidents of white men being attacked by African Americans for speaking ill of Johnson, an overwhelming majority of cases of violence involved white mobs attacking African Americans who were celebrating Johnson’s victory. The New York Herald reported incidents in Manhattan of “one negro [being] rescued by the police from white men who had a rope around his neck” (3) and of a mob of over three thousand whites taking possession of an entire street. The national toll came in at eighteen killed and hundreds more injured. Johnson’s victory and, more specifically, what it symbolized clearly triggered a racially based inferiority complex and sparked a powder keg of anxiety in men around the nation eager to put any doubts about their own masculinity to rest.

These riots served much the same cultural function that lynchings such as Sam Hose’s did. By knocking out Jeffries and publicly becoming an object of desire for the scores of white women who chased him, Johnson simultaneously threatened both white masculinity and white womanhood7 and evoked a similar response as Hose did for his alleged murder of Alfred Cranford and for the alleged rape and murder of Mattie Cranford. As in the case of lynchings, the riots provided a way for whites to violently and publicly dominate and emasculate blacks and subsequently regain their position of social and racial dominance.

Further response to the fight included Congress’ complete reversal of its position on banning motion picture films of prizefights. With the specter of re-creations of a black champion brutalizing the Great White Hope hanging above them, Congress passed a bill suppressing fight films within three weeks of the Johnson–Jeffries fight. Further, both the fight and Johnson himself became the subject of multiple attacks in print in which both were portrayed as “a blot on modern civilization” (Gilmore 8). Most notably, the July 16, 1910, issue of The Outlook, a weekly magazine, featured a signed editorial from Theodore Roosevelt, a famous advocate for boxing, in which he called Johnson’s victory “pure race antagonism” and called for American citizens to ensure that the Johnson–Jeffries fight was “the last fight in the United States” (qtd. in Gilmore 551). What had previously been a national passion had now become a stain on civilization that had to be blotted out of public view, so long as it resulted in images of a corporeally superior black man. One way or another, white American men had to protect their own masculinity and manliness through all means, violent and otherwise, available to them. Interestingly, photographs of Johnson subsequently losing the heavyweight championship to Jess Willard in 1915 would instantly become a standard part of the décor of white bars for years to come and would serve as a symbol of white pride and white power alongside two other iconic 1915 moments: the release of D. W. Griffith’s The Birth of a Nation and Bill Simmons’ reincarnation of the Ku Klux Klan in a fiery ritual atop Stone Mountain, just outside Atlanta.

7 In addition to his hordes of white female admirers, Johnson had a white wife, with whom he was frequently photographed. Johnson’s association with white women led to his conviction for white slavery in 1912 for crossing the Illinois state line with a white woman.
Even before his fight with Jeffries was anticipated, Johnson had deliberately conducted himself in a way designed to aggrandize his already strong sense of both masculinity and manliness. For example, prior to public sparring matches, Johnson would intentionally wrap his penis in gauze to make it appear larger. While such a move appears to reinforce white fears of black sexuality as primal and savage, it also provides a rather graphic and blunt means of reinforcing the idea that Johnson is the most masculine man on the planet. Additionally, Johnson made sure his white wife appeared in public well-dressed and visibly happy. Consequently, Johnson ensured that his wife was seen not as a concubine or even a courtesan, but rather as a happily married and well-provided-for woman. Johnson therefore exhibited the manly trait of being a husband who both provides for and dotes on his wife. Thus, Johnson’s brutal prowess and his

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8 I distinguish between these two terms using Bederman’s distinction, in which masculinity refers to traits tied to being a man that are based on sex, whereas manliness refers to traits that are tied to society’s gender construction of what the ideal man should be.
attentiveness toward his wife combined to leave white men feeling emasculated and displaced from their accustomed position of being the master race.

**Medicalized Manhood: Neurasthenia and Emasculation**

This sense of emasculation was seen not just as an identity crisis or even a racial crisis in the late nineteenth century, but in fact as proof of disability. Starting in the late nineteenth century and continuing into the first decades of the twentieth century, neurologists began diagnosing men in near epidemic-level numbers with neurasthenia, which was defined in *American Nervousness* (1881) by George Beard as “nervelessness—a lack of nerve force” (3). Period neurologists believed neurasthenia’s primary cause to be a reduced amount of masculine energy. While symptoms also included such physical ailments as muscle spasms and dyspepsia, the primary symptoms were various forms of sexual dysfunction ranging from impotence to spermatorrhea.9 Beard likened a neurasthenic man to a battery that had lost half of its reserves and, therefore, could not fully complete its proper function. Further, researchers and public figures alike argued that the massive numbers of men suffering from neurasthenia served as proof of the crippling effects of civilized10 men becoming too soft and too decadent in their manner. In short, the lack of manliness felt by white men following such moments as the Johnson–Jeffries fight had been medicalized and left those afflicted with it as disabled as amputees and the congenitally disfigured.

The prevalence of neurasthenia during this period has multiple implications. First, it creates a correlation between having a lack of masculinity and/or manliness and being disabled. While this relationship establishes the disabled as lacking in traditional sex-based traits and furthers their displacement from mainstream society, that issue will be discussed in a later chapter. More important for our immediate purposes is the fact that the medical definition of neurasthenia applied during the late nineteenth century shows that during this period a lack of masculinity was seen as a medical disability. Consequently, moments that left men feeling emasculated, such as Sam Hose’s attack on the Cranford family or Johnson bloodying Jeffries, also left them not just metaphorically but also literally disabled. Consequently, it fueled the need for a white male hero, such as Pat Glendon or eventually Ben Cameron,11 to rise up and save the race. London exemplifies this when he describes Glendon as a “figure from some old fairy story or folk tale” (22) who his father has “made a man out of” (19). Such a description stands in contrast to the “black and hairy . . . man-eater” (40) Roughhouse Kelly, whom Glendon knocks out with one punch, leaving him feeling “as if the roof had fallen on [his] head” (43). Further, this connection between emasculation and disability complicates the notion of the Wounded South that arose following Reconstruction in a way that demonstrates that battle wounds and amputated limbs were not the only disabilities incurred by Southern men as a result of the Civil War and the racial politics of Reconstruction.

Beyond being a gender-based disability, neurasthenia was also seen during this period as a race-based disability, specifically one that afflicted only white men. Turn-of-the-century experts on neurasthenia, including Beard, claimed that neurasthenia came from men being overly civilized and, therefore, “scarcely exist[ed] among savages or

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9 Spermatorrhea is defined as involuntary sexual excitement and seminal leakage.
10 During this period, “civilized” would have read almost exclusively as code for “white.”
11 Hero and founder of the KKK in D. W. Griffith’s 1915 film *The Birth of a Nation.*
barbarians, or semi-barbarians or partially civilized people” (92). As a result, Beard’s followers, particularly Clark University founder and president G. Stanley Hall, advocated white boys, adolescents, and young men harnessing and releasing their inner savage energies, or what Hall termed “embracing the primitive” (“Defend” 3). Most famously, while addressing a kindergarten teachers’ convention in Chicago in April 1899, a mere two weeks before Sam Hose was lynched, Hall argued that little boys should be encouraged to fight one another and to “behave like savages” (3). As London shows, Glendon exhibits Hall’s ideal vision of manhood: he maintains an “enduring primitiveness” (30) and walks the streets of San Francisco as “imperturbable as a red Indian” (34), yet he retains a civilized nature—exemplified by his love for poetry, especially Longfellow. As Bederman points out, neurasthenia provided a racial paradox in that “only white bodies had the capacity to be truly civilized, yet civilization destroyed white male bodies” (88). Hall viewed the solving of this paradox not only as essential in saving white civilization, but also as a key component in pushing whites toward the state of millennial perfection that he and many other eugenicists believed to be the destiny of whiteness.

Hall proposed that this paradox could be solved through what he termed recapitulation therapy. Hall’s theory relied on his viewing children as savages and as the evolutionary equal of adults from one of what he considered to be the lower races. During this period, Hall advocated parents and teachers encouraging boys to embrace their “primitive passions” as a means of “inoculating” them with the primal strength that they would need later in life to ward off neurasthenia and to further white racial dominance. In essence, if boys were allowed to “relive their ancestors’ primitivism” (“Needed” 597), they would carry a weakened form of savagery in their blood that would vaccinate them against future emasculation and over-civility. This call for recapitulation tapped into racial and corporeal anxieties already present among white men and garnered social currency through the rise of a wide variety of national organizations and pastimes.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a slew of organizations dedicated to fostering manhood took root in American culture. Adult men seeking to reinforce their manliness led to an increase in popularity for fraternal organizations, such as the Red Men, the Freemasons, the Oddfellows, and beginning in 1915, the Ku Klux Klan. Further, the period saw the birth of organizations, such as the Boy Scouts and the YMCA, that devoted themselves to transforming boys into “manly” men. Likewise, the period saw a growing fascination with athletic male bodies and, as a result, witnessed the rise of several “masculine” sports, most notably boxing and football. In the case of boxing, starting in the 1880s, prizefighting rose from being a diversion for the masses to becoming a pastime of the middle classes in which boys received instruction from an early age. By the time of the Johnson–Jeffries fight, men frequently identified the bodies of white prizefighters as representing a racial ideal, leading to the rise of magazines such as Physical Culture. In the case of football, the 1890s saw college and semiprofessional football become both a national craze and the object of praise for its ability to foster virility and masculinity. Consequently, in an 1893 editorial for Harper’s Weekly, Theodore Roosevelt commented that the game’s ability to develop manliness was even worth an occasional death on the field, if it prevented the feminization of American men. The rise in popularity of each of these sports and organizations illustrates America’s
willingness to embrace Hall’s suggestion of injecting the next generation of men with an increased dose of primitive physicality.

Hall, however, did not just call for young white males to be injected with a dose of manliness or masculinity. Rather, he specifically called for a hearty dose of primitivism and savagery, terms that have darker implications than the type of masculinity associated with football or with the Boy Scouts. Consequently, it should come as no surprise that a period that saw American and especially Southern men feeling emasculated on a widespread basis and being diagnosed as neurasthenic on an almost epidemic level also witnessed a sharp uptick in racial violence, both in terms of the frequency with which it occurred and in terms of the barbarity of methods used, as evidenced by the cases of victims such as Sam Hose as well as by the nationwide fury after Johnson’s victory over Jeffries.

Hall’s call for men to embrace their primordial roots also further solidified the link between this surge in lynching and other forms of racial violence and the growth of sideshows and other forms of freakery that took place during this period. Because Hall’s widely published beliefs on the nature of white men emphasized their connections to a more savage past, visitors to freak shows could thus establish a hereditary link between themselves and ethnic and racial freak exhibits such as the Missing Link or the Wild Men of Borneo. Even primarily corporeal freaks who were dressed in ways aimed at suggesting a more primitive background, such as Lionel the Lion Faced Boy and the Wild Aztec Children, became expressions of a latent nature buried inside the DNA of their white visitors. The presence of this savagery in the furthest branches of white men’s family trees ultimately reached the country at large through such popular means as Jack London’s 1907 serialized novel Before Adam, in which a white man lives an alternative dream life as a prehistoric half-human, half-ape tree dweller named Long Tooth; through an early Little Rascals film entitled The Kid from Borneo (1933), in which the gang is convinced that Bumbo, the wild man from the circus, is Spanky’s uncle; and through John Robertson’s film version of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (1920).

Like each of these textual examples, the sideshow exhibits mentioned above allowed visitors to acknowledge their inner brute and confront it in the flesh. Such exhibits provided a visual projection of the masculinity that medical experts like Hall argued white men were capable of harnessing from within and needed to embrace in order to ward off neurological dysfunction. However, unlike the savage on display, the white man viewing him believed himself capable of controlling this savagery through his gentility, thereby taking the trait that he believed to be disabling him and re-establishing it as a manly virtue. The freakishness of such exhibits, then, was not their savagery, but rather the freaks’ inability to stop externalizing it and their lack of more civil qualities. The visitor’s manly civility, in contrast to the freak, changes from a disability to a sign of racial superiority. The freak serves as an effigy for the visitor’s own disability by reminding him of his own capacity for masculinity and confirming his superiority over the freak through its lack of the manliness that he possesses. Thus, by exploiting, objectifying, and simultaneously expelling the freak from civilized society, the visitor ultimately dispels his own disability.

In this regard, Sam Hose’s lynching also served as his enfreakment. Through his brutal public killing, the men of Palmetto not only exhibited but also revealed in their masculine prowess and their ability to destroy the savage beast whose own masculinity
had been so recently displayed as a threat to white civilization. However, Hose’s lynching also allowed them to ward off the communal neurasthenia experienced by many small Southern communities following Reconstruction. While there may or may not have been any amputees or wounded vets in the lynch mob, any of the men in the mob who bought into the concept of the Wounded South or who suffered from any of the physical or psychological effects of neurasthenia were also disabled. Their literal display of their own savagery by torturing and immolating Sam Hose allowed the older men in the mob to recharge their own masculine energy and provided the younger men with a way, following Hall’s advice, to ward off neurological disability. At the same time, however, because the mob exercised this violence in the name of a violated woman, Hose’s lynching provided them with a platform for demonstrating the superiority of their chivalry and supposed manliness over a race believed to be incapable of possessing those traits. Likewise, the town’s ability to return to “business as usual” before nightfall suggests that, unlike Hose, its savagery is restrained and the members of the mob are instead controlled by more civil traits. In this way, Hose’s charred, mangled corpse emblematized the town’s masculine superiority over a member of a supposedly savage race. Hose’s body also symbolizes the town casting out a being that was unable, according to the town, of sharing the townsmen’s capacity for manliness. Through this process, Hose became the kin of the Missing Link found touring with every circus in the country.

Hall’s beliefs become even more troublesome in that they not only justified lynching African Americans, but also undermined the efforts of those seeking to eradicate lynching, most notably the writings of Ida B. Wells. In “A Red Record” (1895), Wells famously declared that lynching did not prove the brutality or hypersexual nature of African Americans; rather, it was “the white man’s civilization and the white man’s government that [was] on trial” (98). Similarly, in a 1905 editorial for McClure’s, Ray Stannard Baker argued that by losing his capacity for self-restraint and resorting to mob violence, “the white man becomes as savage as the negro” (313). Such arguments both served to enhance the supposed manliness of Northern communities and ridiculed the lack of that same trait in Southern men. Wells even went so far as to link manliness with speaking out against lynching. In “Southern Horrors” (1892), she proclaimed that all men, no matter how physically virile, who refused to speak out against lynching “[stood] as cowards who [refused] to open their mouths before this great outrage.” In short, Wells constructed an anti-lynching campaign that “produced an alternative discourse of race and manhood” (Bederman 59) that eventually became the core of the anti-lynching movement.

Hall, however, by encouraging men to embrace their inner savageness and arguing that boys should be encouraged to engage in savage behavior to protect them against neurological dysfunction, changes the context of the anti-lynching movement’s arguments. Under Hall’s beliefs, when anti-lynching advocates like Wells aver that “[t]he American citizen in the South is at heart more a barbarian than the negro whom he regards as a savage” (qtd. in Giddings 157), they lose some of their ability to redraw the lines of American manhood. While Wells intended to suggest that those who support lynching are less manly than those who do not, Hall would argue exactly the opposite. It shows Southern white men as having a much stronger sense of masculinity. Those who have participated in a lynching do not suffer from neurasthenia or any similar disability.
Thus, Wells unintentionally validates Hall’s ideas and inadvertently vindicates lynching as a cure for disability. These ideas of savagery invigorating a latent masculinity would be put on full display in the town of Newnan, Georgia, on April 26, 1899. There, a throng of cheering onlookers would delight in the ultimate fusion of savagery and spectacle.

“A Monster in Human Form”: Body Politics, Yellow Journalism, and Sam Hose

On April 28, 1899, an unsigned editorial entitled “The Georgia Exhibition” appeared in the Springfield Weekly Republican, a Massachusetts newspaper. Its author excoriated the barbaric nature of “the exhibition given to the world by the white civilization of Georgia” (qtd. in Ginzburg 19). Further, the editorial described how hundreds of Atlantans hurriedly boarded special trains bound for the exhibition site “to see the fun” (20) and expressed doubt that any audience ever “gave greater evidences of joy in such a spectacle or rushed with greater eagerness to secure mementoes” (19). The lavish spectacle that caused such frenzy was not the circus, the state fair, or the latter-day descendant of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West show suggested by the editorial’s title. Nor was it the screening of a new collection of Lumière shorts, a one-night show by Harry Houdini, or even the unveiling of an architectural marvel surpassing the Ferris wheel that had debuted six years earlier at the World’s Columbian Exhibition (commonly called the 1893 World’s Fair) in Chicago. Not even one of Teddy Roosevelt’s beloved boxing matches or football games could compete with the electric atmosphere surging through the hot Georgia afternoon. The carnivalesque atmosphere and hottest ticket in town described here was the torture, mutilation, and roasting of a human being, an African-American farmhand named Sam Hose,12 who had been accused of murdering his employer and then raping the employer’s wife. While newspaper editorials caricatured Hose as feral and beastly, the ritual of the lynching itself did not merely stamp out Hose’s savagery. Instead, it also tapped and relocated it as a cure for the community’s collective neurasthenia.

The editorial categorizes the mob’s behavior as “the naked savagery of the primitive man” (19) and proclaims it to have been “more savage than any act in the annals of the history of the Orient or the Malays” (20), suggesting that it met the call for whites re-embracing their primitivism given by Hall a few days before. However, this lynching and all of its savage and carnivalesque trappings exemplifies a larger movement in Southern lynchings in which the community re-established its claims as a closed civilization and attempted to cast out its own communal inferiority complex. While this claim is partially supported by the editorial labeling the mob’s violent creativity as a superlative example of “the devilish ingenuity of man” (19), an examination of the lynching itself along with the press coverage surrounding it demonstrates just how deeply the lynching tree’s roots were embedded in ideas of corporeal abnormality, white masculinity, and by extension, white male body image.

12 Sam Hose was known by many names in his lifetime, including Sam Hose, Sam Holt, Sam Wilkes, and Tom Wilkes; the last of these is believed to have been his birth name. The appellation Sam Holt is believed to have been inspired by the Sam Holt brand of firearms, popularly sold in the Sears Roebuck catalog. The Sam Holt brand of shotgun was a common fixture in many rural Georgia homes during this period. Because the bulk of my secondary sources refer to him as “Sam Hose,” I will do so as well throughout.
Public excitement in anticipation of Hose’s lynching reached a manic pitch on April 23, when the *Atlanta Constitution* ran a story detailing Hose’s capture the previous night in Marshallville, Georgia. Hose was the only suspect in the murder of his employer, Alfred Cranford, and the predominant assumption was that he had also ravished Cranford’s wife. The story implied that Hose would be graphically tortured before being hanged or burned to death. This story followed several promises of impending violence as well as editorialized features that had stirred public sentiment in favor of vigilante justice. For example, the newspaper’s front-page headline on April 14 had proclaimed “Determined Mob after Hose; He Will Be Lynched If Caught.” Additionally, on April 19, it had assured its readers that “[w]hen Hose is caught, he will either be lynched and his body riddled with bullets or he will be burnt to death” (qtd. in Dray, *At the Hands* 2). As a result, two overflowing trainloads of Atlantans, hoping to see the spectacle, made a feverish dash to Newnan, Georgia, where the mob held Hose captive. By the time the sun set on rural Georgia, over 2,000 spectators had sated their bloodlust by witnessing Hose’s particularly gruesome death. Hose had the flesh on his face skinned off; the mob then mutilated, amputated, and eventually eviscerated parts of his body for souvenirs before ultimately immolating him until all that remained was a charred husk. The newspaper coverage surrounding both the accused crime and the lynching itself, as well as the carnivalesque and ritualistic atmosphere that pervaded Hose’s death, make clear how Hose’s lynching epitomizes the way the South used vigilante justice to displace its own communal disability onto the black community.

The days following Cranford’s murder were rife with lurid newspaper accounts that cast Hose as an African-American cross between Lizzie Borden, H. H. Holmes, and Jack the Ripper. In fact, *Atlanta Constitution* book reviews from as late as 1907 paired Hose and Jack the Ripper without any explanation (Arnold 162), showing the degree to which they were linked culturally. According to Georgia Congressman James M. Griggs’ widely reprinted account of the crime, this “monster in human form . . . crept into that happy little home . . . and with an axe knocked out the brains of that father, snatched the child from the mother, threw it across the room out of his way, and then by force accomplished his foul purpose” (qtd. in Arnold 168). Griggs then describes with perversely titillating detail how Hose “carried her helplessness body to another room, and there stripped her person of every thread and vestige of clothing, there keeping her till time enough had elapsed to permit him to commit his fiendish offence twice more and again” (168). Similarly, the *Atlanta Constitution’s* initial coverage of the crime detailed how Hose, the “fiend incarnate,” had crushed Mr. Cranford’s skull with an axe “until the brains oozed out,” then snatched the Cranfords’ baby and “dashed it to the floor” before forcing Mrs. Cranford “to submit to the most shameful outrage which one of her sex can suffer” (qtd. in Dray 5). Griggs’ account, embellished as it was with fabricated details, provided potboiler-style reading and whipped up public sentiment against Hose. More importantly, however, fictionalized accounts such as this also enfreaked African Americans as soulless monsters. Simultaneously, this yellow journalism constructed Hose’s white victims as avatars whose deaths galvanized the rest of the white community.

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13 In 1894, Holmes was branded America’s first serial killer after confessing to killing twenty-seven women during the Chicago World’s Fair the previous year. His actual body count is believed to have been well over two hundred women. See Larson; see also Schechter.
into restoring their own potency through hunting and vivisecting the beast that they believed threatened their community.

According to Phillip Dray, such news accounts of the Hose–Cranford case “constituted a kind of ‘folk-pornography’” (At the Hands 4) that found a rabid audience among white Southern readers. Dray further situates coverage of lynchings as erotically charged, proclaiming that “[s]tories of sexual assault, insatiable black rapists, tender white virgins, and manhunts . . . that culminated in lynchings were the bodice rippers of their day” (4). The cumulative effect of these pulp-laced accounts became even more exacerbated as they often were juxtaposed with exposés of all sorts of crimes being committed by a supposed black criminal underbelly. Southern newspapers’ construction of a “cumulative impression” of a “world made precarious by Negroes” (5) allowed such libelous accounts to move beyond mere character assassination. By relegating African Americans to a realm ranging somewhere between the amoral and the teratological, accounts such as the coverage of the Hose–Cranford case made black bodies emblematic of the white community’s own hardships and allowed the lynching tree to become a stage, or even an altar, upon which the community could perform a ritual cleansing through the enfreakment and destruction of the racial other. As is frequently the case with effigies, the black bodies often needed to be burned in order for their power to be symbolically transferred onto the community they threatened to cripple.

While Dray’s use of the term “folk pornography” refers to a phrase used by Jacquelyn Dowd Hall to describe the South’s fascination with lynchings as perversely eroticized events, it applies equally well to the pure objectification of bodies, both black and white, found in accounts such as those mentioned above. While accounts of Hose tearing Mrs. Cranford’s clothes from her body and ravishing her time and again certainly provided vicarious sadomasochistic and erotic thrills to turn-of-the-century Southern readers, such accounts also directly engaged cultural fears surrounding disability. In addition to their lurid description of rape, accounts of the Hose–Cranford case, such as Griggs’, graphically described Hose using an axe to dash Mr. Cranford’s brains out of his skull before violently throwing the child to the floor as if it were a ragdoll. In these accounts, all three white bodies—male, female, and child alike—are left helpless and broken, having succumbed to the black intruder. In short, the white victims are left corporeally ruined and mutilated, their mangled bodies put under public scrutiny and left at the mercy of the public imagination. They have become three more freaks in the American dime museum.14

Moreover, Hose himself is not described merely as a “monster” or a “fiend.” Rather, he is described as a “monster in human form” and a “fiend incarnate.” This distinction, while subtle, is not at all trivial for two reasons. First, it describes Hose as the nineteenth century’s version of Randall Flagg15—not at all human, but rather pure evil disguised as a human. Consequently, Hose becomes evil in a human shape, living among

14 Dime museums were permanent facilities that featured a variety of natural, ethnic, and other human curiosities on continuous display. The most famous of these museums, Barnum’s American Museum in New York, was the original home to such famous freak show attractions as the Fiji Mermaid, Tom Thumb, and the Missing Link.

15 Randall Flagg, also frequently referred to as the Dark Man, is the primary villain in many of Stephen King’s novels. He is described as the concept of evil itself and takes on multiple forms, human and not, but most commonly appears as a menacing black man.
humankind and threatening carnal destruction to all of the community’s citizens, leaving its victims either dead or permanently altered in the public’s mind. Whether he kills them, assaults them, or rapes them, Hose redefines how others perceive his victims, and his attack upon them becomes the primary facet of their identity. Hose permanently stains his victims’ social standing, while bestowing a lifetime of ostracization upon those whom he ravishes. Consequently, Hose becomes metaphorically medicalized, his attacks akin to leprosy, as he leaves his white victims permanently disabled. Further, the only physical trait these accounts use to describe Hose is his black skin; his height, weight, age, and identifying marks are not mentioned, even in accounts written while he was still at large. Thus, his blackness becomes the marker of the evil and disease that has disabled three white bodies and been reported as threatening to bestow the same fate on the rest of the white community.

Second, it presents Hose in terms consistent with conceptions of Satan, who is able to take on human form and wreak havoc on Earth, terms that match the way H. H. Holmes had described himself three years earlier during his stint on death row in Philadelphia. Holmes had falsely claimed that his skull had changed shape to a form suggesting places for horns on his forehead. These details from his confession had been so widely believed by Americans that he ultimately had to leave instructions that his corpse would be thoroughly encased in concrete as defense against grave robbers, curiosity seekers, and freak show proprietors. Such a reaction to Holmes’ clearly preposterous claims indicates that a significant number of turn-of-the-century Americans believed that evil manifested itself through corporeal aberrations, ranging from traditional freakishness to darker phenotypes. Similarly, the headline in the April 14 edition of the Newnan Herald and Advertiser, which first broke the identity of Alfred Cranford’s alleged killer, read “Awful Tragedy near Cranford’s Mill Wednesday Night—Work of a Devil” (Arnold 70), and the body of the story identified the assumed perpetrator as Hose. From the moment his name had been linked to the crime, Hose had been culturally associated with Holmes, a man who had tormented the imaginations of children across the country in lieu of the boogeyman and who had only been safely exorcised by being hanged. Thus, the use of the word devil firmly places him among those who have been bodily marked as bloodthirsty and innately evil and whose death has protected America’s women and children.

This distinction of Hose as a direct menace to Georgia’s women and children is at least partially tied directly to his race. The night following Hose’s alleged crimes, George Kerwin, a white Sunday-school teacher, deacon, and farmer in the neighboring town of Woolsey, shot a young woman named Pearl Knott in the forehead with a revolver before sinking her body in the Flint River. Examiners later discovered that Knott was pregnant, with Kerwin believed to be the father. According to Arnold, the white citizens of rural Georgia perceived the two crimes in vastly different terms. Kerwin’s actions disgusted them; however, “they were terrified by Hose, who was quickly made into a demon, a monster of incredible depravity” (12). Further, on the night of April 23, the same night as Hose’s lynching, Governor Allen D. Candler ordered the state militia to protect Kerwin in his Atlanta jail cell from the mob. He blatantly refused to make such an order in the

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16 According to both Schechter and Larson, during Holmes’ stint on death row, parents used to taunt and tease their children not to let H. H. Holmes get them when tucking them in for the night.
case of Hose, citing a fear that the returning mob’s bloodlust would spill over into violence against Kerwin. While the turbulent atmosphere in Newnan validated Candler’s concerns about additional bloodshed, the mob’s white-hot vengeance was not directed against Kerwin, whose protection proved to be unnecessary, but instead against local blacks, including Elijah Strickland, whom the mob also burned to death after Hose named him while being tortured. Kerwin ultimately stood trial; Populist Party leader Thomas E. Watson defended him and a jury granted him mercy, sentencing him to life in prison.

The difference between Hose and Kerwin, however, is attributable not solely to race but also to a broader realm of pathological traits. On March 15, roughly a month before Hose’s lynching, Robert Lewis went to the gallows for shooting and killing the foreman of his work crew in the streets of Atlanta the previous summer. A jury sentenced Lewis to death despite significant concerns about his sanity. Further, the Atlanta Constitution provided its readers with lurid and macabre details of Lewis’ final hours, including his terror of the noose, his howling collapse in his cell prior to being taken to the gallows, and the grim irony that a year before he had helped build the very gallows that he was hanged from (Arnold 13-4). In short, whereas the white man who embodied his culture’s concept of normalcy was granted life in prison, the African-American man and the psychologically disabled man were publicly executed to the delight of onlookers.

While it is true that Hose was not even extended his basic right to a trial by jury, both his and Lewis’ deaths ultimately played the same role: a public sacrifice in the name of communal protection.

However, the differences here run deeper than who was given a trial and whose life was spared. Rather, they lie in the fact that the community decided to publicly kill the two accused murderers whose race and mental status branded them as pathological freaks. This distinction can be found in the press calling both Hose and Lewis monsters on a near-daily basis, whereas Kerwin was not similarly labeled. In fact, some members of the press argued that while Kerwin’s crime itself was revolting, the motive behind his actions could at least be understood. Thus, Lewis’ and, especially, Hose’s actions became not just “shocking crimes,” but also evidence of their own monstrous nature. Their race and disability became markers not just of their guilt, but also of their inner depravity, a status that was not attributed to Kerwin. David Garland has referred to public lynchings as “collective criminal punishments” (qtd. in Arnold 15), thereby suggesting that they were used to punish not only the criminal, but also an entire segment of the population.

Thus, in the case of Lewis’ hanging and Hose’s lynching, the white population of Georgia both provided “justice” and indicted the black and disabled populations as criminally driven monsters. In the process, those same “fit” white citizens separated themselves from both of these groups. In fact, a local newspaper described Hose’s crimes as “the career of a monster in human form” (“Murder and Rape” 1), thereby suggesting that they were not just an isolated incident or aberration of his otherwise fine character. Instead, such a description avers that by committing his crimes, he had answered his life’s calling and fulfilled his purpose, mandated by his “monstrosity.” Further, both Lewis’ and Hose’s deaths helped ease anxieties about class and status in a way commonly associated with lynchings. Thus, both victims served roles similar to that played by carnival freaks as discussed in Chapter 1 in that they reminded able-bodied whites of their own comparative normalcy and their own physical superiority in eliminating these menaces from society.
“Swimming in His Blood”: Lynching and Manhood

The focus on women and children in these newspaper accounts is also particularly significant, as all three bodies are described as having been violated and permanently marked. Thus, Mr. Cranford is presented as the physical and, by virtue of his brains having been knocked out, mental equal of his wife and child. He has been physically dominated, his masculinity has been stripped away, and his body has been marked as feminine and childlike. Moreover, he has been left in this wretched condition by a “black fiend” who had been born only one generation out of slavery. Consequently, the Cranfords’ fate becomes emblematic of the racial fears of many white post-Reconstruction Southerners and taps into the construct of the Wounded South. Similarly, it reflects the cultural anxieties instilled by many race sociologists, revisionist historians, and white-supremacy groups of a black uprising leaving Southern white men permanently disenfranchised, emasculated, and crippled. In much the same manner that many second-wave feminist critics have argued that pornography provides justification for rapists by giving them an objectified body on which to reclaim their lost power, accounts of the Hose–Cranford case provided mobs of white Southerners with a similar justification for their own sanguinolency. Moreover, such accounts clearly tap into G. Stanley Hall’s claims about the roots of neurasthenia in men, while providing a concrete visual for the dangers of men losing their sense of masculinity. These accounts show that the regional fears of disabled whiteness and the more national concerns of weakened masculinity did not just run parallel to one another but instead existed on the same continuum as one another. The graphic descriptions of Hose and his victims, therefore, provided a nexus where these dual cultural anxieties collided with one another. These provided the psychological roots of the blood-soaked rituals by which mob members reclaimed their own able-bodied nature.

In the weeks following Hose’s lynching, in the wake of loud criticism from African Americans and sympathetic whites, numerous Southern newspapers defended the mob’s brutality by publishing editorials that focused on similarly visceral accounts of the alleged crime. Perhaps the most fervent of the mob’s defenders was the Atlanta Constitution, which published its defense of the mob on the same day that it paid a reward for Hose’s capture. Taking the stance that one supported either the mob or the alleged crime, the editorial uses such lurid details as the child “swimming in the blood that oozed forth from its father’s wound” (qtd. in Ginzburg 18) as its way of countering critics who “howl[ed] about the lynching” by “stat[ing] the plain facts.” As the editorial reaches its apogee, it strays from these supposed plain facts into sensationalism and conjecture, moving beyond the already hypothetical hyperboles found in previous coverage of the crime. The editorial implores its readers to “[r]emember the dark night in the country home. Remember the slain husband, and, above all, remember that shocking degradation which was inflicted by the black beast [on] his victim, [who was] swimming

17 These fears included fears that black suffrage would lead to miscegenation, fears of black supremacy, and fears of white slavery, among others. Such fears played a key role in the race-baiting tactics of groups such as the Ku Klux Klan. These fears are discussed in more detail in Chapter 1 and at length in Cash and in Woodward, Strange Career.

18 Andrea Dworkin is the most well-known proponent of such a theory.

19 In response to Georgia Governor Allen D. Candler posting a reward of $500 for the capture of Sam Hose, dead or alive, the newspaper offered to match that amount with a $500 reward of its own.
in her husband’s warm blood as the brute held her to the floor” (18). The final line then admonishes the reader who is bothered by the image of “the ravisher in flames” to “go back and view that darker picture of Mrs. Cranford swimming in the blood of her murdered husband” (18).

Such lurid imagery clearly echoes the militant tone of Rebecca Felton’s 1897 address to the Georgia State Agricultural Society, entitled “Woman on the Farm,” which was reprinted in the *Atlanta Constitution* on the day Hose was lynched. Felton called on white men to use “a quick rope” (5) to avenge threats to their wives’ security. According to Felton, “[i]f it needs lynching to protect a woman’s dearest possession from human beasts, then I say Lynch a thousand times a week, if necessary” (5). Similarly, in response to Hose himself, Felton lambasted those who decried Hose being denied a trial, averring that “[w]hen such a fiend abandons humanity to become a brute” then he should be eliminated in a manner no more humane than “would prevail a mad dog’s fate” (5).

Clearly, the *Atlanta Constitution*’s fiery rhetoric stirs up shades of Felton’s pathos-driven plea to protect the flower of Southern womanhood at all costs, similarly justifying mob violence as a necessary line of communal defense. The editorial, however, is as much interested in protecting Southern masculinity as it is in preserving feminine virtue. While it certainly invokes the broken bodies of Mrs. Cranford and her infant, the editorial’s dominant image is Mr. Cranford’s blood, which covers the body of his wife and child alike. Consequently, the editorial leaves the impression that the reason why Mrs. Cranford and her infant have been placed in this situation is because of Mr. Cranford’s physical destruction, making the physical domination of a white body by a black one the cause of the “fate worse than death” that ensued. Emphasizing Mr. Cranford’s blood places some of the responsibility on his inability to protect them.

Significantly, Mr. Cranford is the only victim whose blood was shed, the only victim whose body is physically damaged, and the only victim into whose brain Hose “sank [his ax] to the hilt” (qtd. in Ginzburg 18). Thus, it is not Southern womanhood but rather Southern manhood that has been crippled by black vitality. The editorial attempts to restore the masculinity that Cranford and the community lose through the symbol of his bloodied body by describing Cranford as “unsuspecting.” It then emphasizes the lurking, almost supernatural, nature of the black threat by describing Hose as sneaking up on his victims “noiselessly.” Consequently, Hose and his fellow African-American men become vampire-like20 monsters who hide in the shadows waiting for their chance to infect, mangle, and/or slay their white victims as though they were chattel.

Further, it specifically casts Cranford as “an industrious, unassuming, and hardworking farmer,” who was “at peace with the world, serving God, and loyal to humanity” (18). Cranford ultimately becomes a Southern everyman, the very model of normalcy, so far as Turn-of-the-Century Georgia is concerned. He emblematizes not just a community, but an entire region, such that his maiming represents the physical deformity of all of the men in the community. He symbolizes the concept of a Wounded South already psychologically embedded in the poor hardworking Southern men, many of them veterans, still attempting to repair a state particularly decimated and in wide swaths literally burned to the ground by the Union army. The visibility of Mr. Cranford’s blood in this editorial suggests that Hose’s immolation protected Southern manhood from

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20 Vampire mythology was particularly popular during this period.
further disability at least as much as it protected Southern womanhood from further ravishing. By physically destroying the body of the “noiseless” black threat, the people of Palmetto, Georgia, attempted to repair their disability and regain a sense of physical normalcy. The fires set by General Sherman’s troops during his March to the Sea had physically and psychologically reduced much of rural Georgia to ashes; conversely, the burning of Hose’s body allowed that same region to begin to rise from its ashes.

The Confederate Dead: Lynching, Redemption, and the Civil War
An exploration of the town’s contributions to the war provides evidence that reminders of broken Confederate bodies repulsed Newnan’s residents and that they actively sought to cast themselves as prototypically All-American in terms of their physicality. During the Civil War, Newnan boasted the moniker “Hospital City” because of the seven Confederate hospitals located within the town limits. Following the nearby Battle of Brown’s Mill alone, Newnan hospitals treated over 10,000 Confederate soldiers, many of whom would have left as amputees or as otherwise physically scarred. Consequently, Newnan surely witnessed the crippling effects of the Civil War on the bodies of Southern men far more extensively than many towns. The use of nearly all of the town’s private residences and churches as places for wounded soldiers to convalesce made broken bodies omnipresent, especially during the final months of the war. As a result, Newnan enjoyed a reputation as the leader in providing for wounded and recovering Southern heroes. As long as the war was raging, those bodies symbolized Southern courage, determination, and martyrdom. Once General Lee surrendered at Appomattox, however, those bodies became emblematic of the South’s loss, the amputated war wounds turning from red badges of courage to scarlet letters, as indicated by the official change in the town’s nickname.

Shortly following the war, it changed from “Hospital City” to the “City of Homes,” a moniker that Newnan still boasts today. While the nickname has come to be a touristy gimmick, it originally, at least in part, signified that General Sherman did not enter Newnan’s town limits on his March to the Sea, and as a result, the town’s homes served as physical bastions of the Old South and proof that not everything had been burned to the ground. Consequently, the town elected to focus on its resistance to Yankee invasion, its role in preserving traditional Southern society, and its embracing of the domestic sphere, which epitomized American normalcy. While many of the town’s Antebellum buildings still stand today, including the Confederate headquarters used during the Battle of Brown’s Mill, all of the buildings used as Confederate hospitals have been razed. In fact, many of them had been leveled by the time of Hose’s lynching in 1899, suggesting a desire to suppress anything that hinted at a weakness in white Southern males.

In addition, Newnan could boast of one native Confederate hero: William Thomas Overby, one of Mosby’s Rangers and nicknamed “the Nathan Hale of the Confederacy.” Captured at Fort Royal, Virginia, on September 23, 1864, Overby remained loyal to his unit and to the South, even when his captors offered to spare his life in exchange for divulging the location of Mosby’s headquarters. Following his refusal, General George

21 All description of monuments located in Newnan and knowledge of town history, unless otherwise cited, comes from a self-guided walking tour of the town and its outlying areas taken by the writer on May 15, 2011.
Custer had Overby “executed without trial.” Custer ordered him hanged from a walnut tree and pinned a note to his chest that read “Such is the fate of Mosby’s gang.” Overby was buried in Markham, Virginia, near the site of his hanging, and at the time of the Sam Hose lynching, his body had not been returned to Newnan. An outpouring of pomp and circumstance surrounded his reburial in Oak Hill cemetery in 1997, including his bones lying in state in a coffin draped in the Confederate flag and Confederate swords, Confederate re-enactors wearing full mourning regalia, and his body being transported via a horse-drawn artillery caisson with hundreds of townspeople in attendance. Even 130 years later, the town still saw Overby’s actions as representing the town’s best qualities.

The emphasis in the inscription on his courthouse monument, erected in 1952, that he was “executed without trial” suggests that this aspect of his death particularly injured the town’s vision of itself and connects his 1864 hanging to Hose’s 1899 lynching and burning. Even though Hose had killed a resident of Palmetto, not Newnan, the fact that Cranford was a veteran of the Confederacy supports the theory that the town wanted to give Hose an even worse fate than that bestowed upon their own fallen hero. In comparison to Overby’s death, Hose’s lynching was far more grotesque, and his body far more radically disfigured and marred. Hose’s lynching stripped away some of the stigma attached to the image of Overby’s body hanging at the end of a Union rope, allowing Overby to serve as the full-fledged war hero the town wanted. Hose’s lynching served as redemption for those Confederate soldiers, like Overby, who had been treated as inferiors by the Union army.

Newnan’s contributions to the war effort and its residents’ subsequent attitudes about them make it particularly significant that Hose’s lynching parade began at the
Memorial to the Confederate Dead, which the town had erected in front of Newnan’s courthouse in 1885, as inscribed on the monument’s right panel. Further examination of the monument itself reveals the ways in which it symbolizes the attitudes that led to the orgy of violence that surrounded Hose’s torture and immolation. The monument’s left panel simply gives the dates 1861–1865, similar to birth and death dates on a gravestone. This panel is clearly meant to signify the time period during which Confederate soldiers died in the line of duty; however, it also serves as a tombstone for the Confederacy itself, the dates marking the Confederacy’s birth and death. Such an idea anthropomorphizes the Confederacy, whose embodiment is represented by the stereotypical Confederate officer who stands atop the monument. The monument then becomes a memorial to the body of the Confederacy itself and to the notions of Southern virility and manhood that were tied to it. It becomes a symbol of what the South was, at least in Southerners’ collective cultural imagination, and what it wants to become again. It serves as a visual embodiment of both the South’s own imposed sense of having been physically destroyed and the construct of the Wounded South, as well as Southerners’ collective schema of what normalcy is. In many ways, it serves as a counterpoint to the statue of Henry Grady in Atlanta, which was dedicated in 1906, represents the birth of the New South, and found the bodies of three African Americans draped across it during the Atlanta race riots in 1906.

Figure 2.6: Memorial to the Confederate Dead, located at the courthouse in Newnan, Georgia.

The front base of the monument further reflects the South’s conflicted views toward its own disability. The inscription there reads:
Our Confederate Dead
Whom Power Could Not Corrupt
Whom Death Could Not Terrify
Whom Defeat Could Not Dishonor

This portion of the monument clearly masculinizes both the deaths of these soldiers and the death of the Confederacy as a whole. This inscription indicates that Southern soldiers are without dishonor or moral corruption. Further, it indicates that, even when facing death, Confederate soldiers did not show fear and represented the valor and courage of the South. In other words, they died like men. Such language allows the South to redeem itself, suggesting that the South as a whole still has its honor and can take pride in not having shown fear. Thus, the South itself died like a man. Interestingly enough, this memorial does not talk about those who were captured, went missing in action, or were just wounded. This omission suggests that soldiers who were merely maimed by the war and whose injuries/disabilities remind others of the South’s crippling have been corrupted, have lost their manhood, and have been dishonored. Moreover, the monument makes no mention of soldiers who, like Colonel Overby, were hanged as prisoners without trial. In fact, in 1899, there was no public monument to Overby, the town’ most famous Confederate soldier and the eventual posthumous recipient of the Confederate Medal of Honor. This omission grants separate statuses to those killed in battle and those executed at the hands of kangaroo courts. This difference in statuses suggests that those who fell victim to vigilante justice, the fate the town subjected Hose to, did not die in a manner befitting the values encapsulated by the soldier atop the monument.

These ideas connect to the role of double consciousness\(^\text{22}\) and suggest the South defining both its own disability and the disability of those with war wounds in its own terms. Moreover, the monument demonstrates a decision being made as to what those ideas mean and who can be a part of honorable Southern society. It reshapes the notion of a Wounded South into something more dignified and actually superior to any type of Northern or even American identity. It then suggests that those marked as corrupted or dishonored or even afraid cannot share in Southerness. It gives formal parameters to the idea that just living in the South does not necessarily make one a Southerner. It reminds Southern men that they can either accept their physical weakening or show courage and honor and become a Southerner. Such an attitude played a central role in the lynching and the burning alive of thousands of African Americans, including Sam Hose, as well as many of the barbaric practices that surrounded the lynching ritual. The members of the mob killed Sam Hose because he threw their own enfreakment and crippledom in their faces and because doing so gave them the opportunity to prove that they too were men of “honor” who would remove any corrupted elements from their society, including empowered black men.

The rest of the inscription on the front of the monument further emphasizes Southern superiority:

\(^{22}\) See Chapter 3.
It is not in Mortals
To Command Success
But They Who Did More
Deserved It

The word “deserved” is most interesting here. It highlights the victim mindset of the South as a whole, and this part of Georgia in particular, during this period. It suggests that events like the lynching of Sam Hose were about claiming the success and physical vitality that they felt they deserved. It also excuses their state of disability and the ways in which the South has become broken by connecting it to a higher power, reminding everyone that “mortals” cannot “command success.” This language links the Wounded South to diseases and congenital disfigurement. It argues that the South did not become crippled because of any weakness in Southern character or in Southernness as a construct. In fact, they deserved to win, suggesting an innate superiority over everyone else. Just as it’s not someone’s fault if they get multiple sclerosis, tuberculosis, or cerebral palsy, it’s not the South’s fault that they were pummeled in the war. They lost because of bad luck. By extension, Hose’s lynching can be seen as fate allowing the town’s white men redemption through an opportunity to demonstrate their superiority over the most notorious of the region’s black residents.

Another local monument, dedicated in 1952 by the Ladies Memorial Association and located at the head of the Confederate cemetery, complicates these sentiments. The inscription on the front of this monument proclaims that it was erected “to the memory of our Southern Heroes who wore the Grey.” Interestingly, this monument does not specify only those killed. This eradicating of lines of distinction suggests that by the time this monument was erected, the notion of the Wounded South had waned, and fewer Southerners saw themselves as crippled or needing to increase their own physical potency. It is interesting to note that 1952, the year the monument was dedicated, also marked the first year since the Tuskegee Institute began keeping records in 1882 that it did not record any lynchings. The cemetery monument, therefore, reflects a different way of viewing the fallen Confederacy that evolved as lynching rates fell. The previously held attitude is not completely gone, however: the front of the monument does post a reminder that the Confederacy was “Outnumbered Not Conquered.” Further, the top of the monument claims that “No Cause E’er Rose So Just and True” and that “None Fell So Free From Crime.” While the shift in language from the courthouse monument is subtle, it is significant. Although it still rings with a tone of moral superiority, the language is not nearly as corporeally or disability based. The language focuses instead on the moral righteousness of the cause itself, rather than on the lack of corruption and dishonor in the soldiers themselves. Further, no mention is made at all of the soldiers’ courage, and the embodiment of the values etched on this monument does not take the form of a soldier, but instead takes the form of two Confederate flags. Compared to the monument erected in the lynching era, the cemetery monument de-emphasizes the body.

Like the one at the courthouse, this monument also has the dates 1861 and 1865 etched on it, but its purpose is different. The courthouse monument comes across as an attempt to resurrect the fallen Confederacy and its soldiers and to give them a new body and the physical prowess to go with it. Furthermore, it is located in the town square, in the very hub of civic life. By contrast, this monument, which has been placed in the closed-off space of a cemetery about a mile outside of the downtown area, looks like a
tombstone. It comes across as finally laying the Confederacy to rest. It gives the Confederacy and its soldiers a respected place in cultural memory, but limits that space to the corners reserved for things whose time has truly passed. If the town seems finally to have buried its Confederate dead, in 1899, it was more interested in using blood and bodily sacrifices to resurrect the fallen Confederacy in a new, idealized body.

Evidence that Southern whites, and more specifically the whites of this particular region of rural Georgia, felt crippled by any sign of black strength can be found in several other examples of racial violence that took place prior to Hose’s lynching. By 1899, a predominantly black regiment of soldiers had been stationed at nearby Fort Haskell, raising white anxieties over a black siege. Willard B. Gatewood notes that the local whites had their fears stoked by “rumors that the black troops planned to invade Macon and take over the city” (140), a supposed threat that exacerbated their habit of “viewing themselves as a beleaguered people” (140). The tension aroused by this juxtaposition of black soldiers and white citizens escalated into violence on January 31, 1899, when somewhere between four and five hundred soldiers were mustered out and placed on a train leaving Georgia. When some of the more intoxicated soldiers began quarrelling with each other and several others began firing their pistols out the window in celebration, a report circulated claiming that white citizens were being fired upon by soldiers who intended “to tear Atlanta up” (qtd. in Arnold 23). When the train pulled into Atlanta, a squad of armed policemen met it and attacked several of the black soldiers who left the train, bloodying the heads of at least five of the soldiers. The next day, the Atlanta Constitution published an article that ameliorated white fears by reporting that the police violence had quelled the supposed siege; a separate article detailed how a group of soldiers scheduled to leave on February 2 would be out for revenge. As a result, police officers and undercover agents swarmed Union Station. When the train pulled out with no problems, local journalists credited police with deterring the uprising that had never been planned in the first place.

While the Atlanta police department’s use of excessive force illustrates the degree to which whites feared any show of black strength, it also demonstrates just how deeply the roots of their phobia ran. Although these two rumored uprisings are among the most famous, they are far from the only such incidents to occur in Georgia during the late 1890s. White newspapers and citizens frequently exaggerated black soldiers’ behavior as threats to enslave whites. Soldiers enjoying a town pass found themselves portrayed as revolutionaries firing the first shots in a coming “race war” (Arnold 20). These slanderous accounts heightened fears that the extinction of whites at the hands of African Americans, as portrayed in such race-baiting fiction as King Wallace’s The Next War (1892) and William Ward Crane’s “The Year 1899” (1893), was commencing. Further, Southern whites’ fears of any black man with a gun illustrate the degree to which they projected their own masculine insecurities onto these black soldiers. Minstrelized journalism of the late 1890s categorized the Philippine natives our soldiers were encountering as part of the Spanish–American War as savage, primitive blacks out to physically dominate or eradicate whites. This connection between Southern blacks and the natives our soldiers encountered allowed Southerners to argue that racial violence was simply them doing their part as viable citizens by fulfilling the nationwide eugenic agenda practiced by 1890s America. Violence against blacks, whether legally sanctioned
or mob led, simply proved that Southern men had the strength required to be part of the national body.

Southerners may have justified racial violence using imagery from the Spanish American War, but the true root of that violence was the lingering effects of the Civil War. The Civil War left the South not only economically and physically annihilated, but also with an inferiority complex: Southern whites viewed themselves as cripples. This complex found its outlet in the form of racial violence, particularly the lynching and the disfiguring of African-American men. According to Arnold, Southerners viewed the racial conflict as “an extension of the great War between the States” in which the enemies had changed from Yankees to “clearly identified racial ‘others’ whose defeat could almost be seen as a vindication of Southern beliefs” (17) Further, it allowed a new generation of Southern men an opportunity to prove that they had the same courage and masculine vitality as their fathers (Zinn and Arnove 11). Thus, the Sam Hose lynching was but one battle in a war waged by the South in an effort to repair its wounds, reassemble its broken body, and reclaim its honor by finally winning the Civil War.

This war rhetoric reached an apogee of violence a few weeks before the murder of Alfred Cranford in what became known as the Palmetto Massacre. Beginning on January 23, 1899, the town of Palmetto, Georgia, fell victim to a series of arsons. As long as the perpetrator remained at large, fear and suspicion ran amok until the town finally hired a black Pinkerton agent to infiltrate the black community and find the arsonist. On March 15, a black man named William Cotton reportedly confessed to local businessman Hal Johnston that he was the leader of a gang of incendiaries responsible for the fires. Immediately, the citizens of Palmetto branded Cotton and his gang as “black terrorists” whose motive was nothing short of the “absolute destruction of the town” (Arnold 49). The following night, according to dramatized newspaper accounts summarized by Arnold
(49), a gang of whitecaps two hundred strong rode into the center of town, broke into the warehouse where the nine members of the gang were being held until their trial, overpowered the guards, lined the prisoners against the wall, and shot them.

The newspaper coverage of the massacre is quite revelatory. The Macon Telegraph ran the headline “Nine Negroes Killed by Citizens” (qtd. in Arnold 51), explicitly differentiating between “Citizen” and “Negro”—or, based on the eugenics-fueled attitudes of the era, the difference between being normal and being a freak. The story ended by warning whites that “[f]urther trouble [was] expected” and that it “seem[ed] certain that a gang of black incendiaries” had formed with the expressed purpose of “burning every house owned or occupied by white people in Palmetto” (qtd. in Arnold 51). Those who wished to no longer be crippled by black power needed to stop the arsonists, using whatever force necessary. On March 18, the Telegraph published a primarily fictionalized account of the massacre steeped in melodrama and hero worship for the masked riders that climaxed with a lurid description of the gunfire and the screaming of terrorized Negroes. While the story “mitigated the awfulness of the deed in romantic folderol” (Arnold 51), it also constructed a bodily narrative in which the physically superior whites easily overpowered a group of black bodies.

Local newspapers ultimately linked the bloodshed of March 15 to the Sam Hose lynching, as the most commonly reported rumor concerning Hose’s motive involved local minister Elijah Strickland’s paying Hose to murder Cranford as revenge for Cranford’s part in the massacre. While it is not known whether or not Cranford participated in the massacre, newspaper accounts commonly cited him as one of its leaders. Consequently, Hose’s death both justified the actions of the masked riders, at least in the eyes of many Southern whites, as necessary and allowed those same Southern whites to prove their own physical dominance over African Americans. Further, the day after Hose’s capture, the Atlanta Journal reported that “six negroes of Palmetto have registered a vow to kill six citizens of the town, each negro selecting his victim and swearing to execute their threats at the first opportunity. Alfred Cranford, who was chopped to pieces ten days ago, had been one of the six selected victims” (qtd. in Arnold 88). This rumor justified both Hose’s lynching and future lynchings, no matter how brutal, by reminding Southern white men of their own supposedly mutilated bodies and equally dismembered manhood.

The massacre, therefore, served as a bit of a nexus point in the paradox of how Southern men saw themselves. The massacre played off of Southerners’ image of their bodies as broken while also proving that Southern men met the standards for physical fitness espoused by the prominent eugenicists and spiritual leaders of the era. By wielding his axe against Cranford, Hose had taken a symbol of local white manhood and disassembled it until it had been transmogrified into a bleeding amputee at the mercy of an empowered black: the same image many Civil War veterans conjured up for other Southerners during and following Reconstruction. Consequently, while some members of the mob that lynched Hose certainly may have sought revenge for Cranford himself, newspaper accounts such as this one indicate that the mob’s primary interest lay in redeeming both the image and the idea of Alfred Cranford. Moreover, such accounts suggest that the mutilation and immolation of Hose’s body replaced the effigy of Cranford’s body with a new effigy.
The Rites of Man: Lynching as Masculine Ritual

The ritualized nature of the Hose lynching makes it particularly emblematic of the restorative powers lynching held over the white Southern consciousness. While the muscular Christianity\(^{23}\) espoused by Billy Sunday and Theodore Roosevelt found outlets in such physical activities as the college football and professional baseball that were growing in popularity across the nation, it also provided modes of redemption for men who sought to shed their emasculated self-image and inject themselves with manliness and potency. The worshipful attitude many Americans held toward their own physical prowess was demonstrated by the large number of Atlantans who left their churches at breakneck speed in order to catch the train to Hose’s lynching. This growing belief that physical fitness equated to moral character fused with another religious strand that flowered in Southern churches during this period: a newfound emphasis on civil religion. This rather unholy union ultimately resulted in Turn-of-the-Century America’s quest to reclaim the manly man and turned violent outbursts against African Americans who, like Hose, reminded Southerners of their supposedly crippled nature into masculinized religious rites.

During this period, civil religion infused many Southern churches, leading to folk worship of the glorious Confederate dead, the near deification of Stonewall Jackson, and participation in Confederate Memorial Day instead of Decoration Day\(^{24}\) becoming a sacrosanct tradition. This canonization of the Confederacy ultimately fused with the eventual racial reconfiguration of the war, exemplified by John Robes’ 1891 labeling of it as “an exhibition of the Anglo-Saxon race on trial” that ultimately elicited “the resolute and unyielding traits belonging to our race” (qtd. in Lears 27). This impulse fed the belief in white purity and white power that also found a home on Southern pulpits. Such a socio-religious celebration of the war took the skulls that were still being turned up in Georgia cornfields from reminders of the fallibility of Southern manhood to sacred markers of Anglo-Saxon sacrifice, giving a racial tone to the claims of Manichaeism\(^{25}\) that also formed part of the Southern religious framework. Thus, it should come as no surprise that Hose’s lynching took place three days before the town’s planned celebration for Confederate Memorial Day and that the procession made sure to take Hose past both the Memorial to the Confederate Dead and First Baptist Church, which halted services so parishioners could go outside and cheer the mob as it passed by, as part of his parade through town. The presence of such glorification of the Confederate dead in juxtaposition with Hose’s lynching underscores the ways in which the desire to recapture the former helped fuel the latter. While C. Vann Woodward has noted that African Americans lost the newly granted rights of Reconstruction “through the reconciliation of white men”

\(^{23}\) Muscular Christianity is the belief that physical fitness equates with moral fitness and that it is a Christian’s duty to maintain a vigorously fit and able body.

\(^{24}\) During this period Decoration Day, which would eventually become Memorial Day, was primarily a Northern holiday and remembrance of Union soldiers. In 1866, Southern states established Confederate Memorial Day with dates ranging from April 25 to mid-June. By 1916, most Southern states had settled on celebrating June 3, which was Jefferson Davis’ birthday.

\(^{25}\) A synthesis of Gnostic Christianity, Zen Buddhism, and spiritual cosmology, Manichaeism is based on the writings of the prophet Mani and thrived between the third and seventh centuries. It focused on questions of duality, particularly the battle between a good, spiritual world of light and an evil world of darkness. At the turn of the twentieth century, some Southern churches taught a bastardized version of it in which the dual forces of good and evil were played by whites and blacks, respectively.
Strange Career 70), it is also true that lynching stripped African Americans of any sort of bodily autonomy during the same time period that muscular Christianity sought to aggrandize white bodies as temples of masculinity. Each of the strands in the fabric of evangelical Southern Protestantism ultimately constructed a muscular form of Christianity that excused lynching as a form of “revitalizing violence” (Lears 32) that reasserted not just the racial superiority of white Southerners, but their bodily superiority as well. This sacred desire to reclaim Southern manhood gave the atmosphere of the Sam Hose lynching the aura of a church sermon and a traveling circus all in one. Certainly, popular accounts ranging from newspaper editorials to the fiery rhetoric of local Klan rallies suggest that lynchings turned the protection of white womanhood into a religious ritual steeped in masculinity.

It should come as little surprise that, outside of a momentary pause at First Baptist Church, the one stop the mob made while leading Hose from the Newnan courthouse to the grove of trees outside town, where he would ultimately meet his fate, was to honor protocol and allow Mattie Cranford to positively identify him. According to Dray, allowing the outraged woman the opportunity to confront her attacker and even participate in killing him, if she wished, was “a ritualized aspect of a Southern lynching” (At the Hands 11). However, as Dray notes, rarely did a woman participate in actually lynching her attacker. Instead, her husband, her father, her brother, or her fiancé traditionally took her place in the lynching party and performed the portion of the lynching traditionally reserved for her, usually lighting the pyre. That a man was allowed to substitute at this important part of the ritual illustrates the depths to which rape was considered a sacred attack not just on the identity of the woman, but on the men in her life as well. In Mrs. Cranford’s case, the idea that Hose had left her a ruined woman had been exacerbated by rumors spread by Governor Candler that Hose had syphilis and had left her diseased, thereby necessitating the excessive nature of his lynching. Most importantly, having Mrs. Cranford publicly accuse Hose highlights the investment that men had in fostering an illusion that their women were safe as long as they were around, which at the very least equaled their investment in the actual safety of those women.

Dray provides further support for this notion that lynching was as much about redeeming men as it was about protecting women through his reminder that this traditional confrontation makes for a curious ritual. One of the primary justifications given for lynching in cases that involved accusations of rape was that it spared white women the humiliation and trauma of having to publicly answer questions about their sexual assault. Clearly, having a woman identify her attacker in front of her own home in the company of hundreds or even thousands of voyeuristic onlookers did little to protect the woman’s privacy or spare her from any shame. Such identifications, however, were guaranteed to be followed by the immediate torture and execution of the attacker by the same men who had failed to protect her in the first place. Playing the role of the damsel in distress once again, she gave the men of the community the opportunity to save her this time by mutilating the body of an African-American man.

26 According to Terry Jones, the roots of the damsel in distress as a stock character with erotic overtones can be found in the nineteenth century, most notably in Justine by the Marquis de Sade. This presentation of the damsel in distress continued into the early twentieth century, particularly in films and serials such as The Adventures of Kathlyn (1913) and in the public debut of the magic trick of sawing a woman in half.
The general lack of concern as to whether or not they had the actual perpetrator of the crime further indicates that lynching was not about justice, vigilante or otherwise. Such evidence suggests that lynchings were more about protecting the myth of the fully protected Southern woman than about protecting actual Southern women. Consequently, lynching became not so much about standing up for women as about standing up against the belief that through attacking their wives, daughters, and sisters, “black fiends,” such as Hose, had left the community’s white men the physical equals of women. To some extent, the so-called “fate worse than death” was not a woman being raped, but a man being so crippled that he could not protect her from being raped.

An example of how Hose’s alleged crime equally destroyed notions of Southern manhood and Southern womanhood can be found in Royal Daniel’s interview of Mattie Cranford for the *Atlanta Journal* three days after her attack. Daniel’s narration of the crime takes a decidedly maudlin turn as he details Mrs. Cranford’s inability to describe the rape itself, claiming that, unable to speak, she “broke down and cried like a little child” (qtd. in Arnold 75). However, Mrs. Cranford is not the only one stripped of adult status. Later in the interview, Daniel emasculates Alfred Cranford’s father, Captain Grippia Cranford. According to Daniel, “[t]he old father is broken under the great strain and it is impossible for him to control his emotions” (75). While Cranford is ostensibly disabled by Hose’s alleged actions, it is Daniel’s detailed description that discredits Cranford’s masculinity. Daniel not only establishes an emotional equality between Captain and Mrs. Cranford, but does so in a way that infantilizes both of them, thereby giving them a trait traditionally applied by Southern whites both to the stereotypical “plantation darkie” and to the “black beast.” Further, Daniel makes it a point to refer to Captain Cranford by his rank, thereby highlighting his status as a veteran of the Civil War. Consequently, Daniel’s article stirs the blood of local white men by exploiting any sense of fractured manhood still lingering from Reconstruction and any white anxieties of a black revolt reversing the racial hierarchy shared by many during this period.

Newspapers also incited Southern men to prove their manhood by describing Hose’s boasting of his own superiority following his alleged rape of Mrs. Cranford. In her first interview, given to E. W. Sharkey of the *Atlanta Constitution* two days after the attack, Mrs. Cranford claimed that having killed her husband and ravished her, Hose boasted as he was leaving, “Now I am through with my work, let them kill me if they can” (qtd. in Arnold 72). It is important to note that Hose is not reported to have said “let them catch me if they can” but instead “let them kill me if they can.” The difference suggests not that Hose believes he can permanently outsmart whites by eluding capture, but that he believes they are not strong enough to destroy him. Such a claim simultaneously teratizes Hose by turning him into a supernatural monster, a freak of nature who should be stuffed and placed in a dime museum, and also disables whites by suggesting that their homes are threatened by Hose or others like him. Moreover, Hose’s supposed claim that he had finished his work suggests he has achieved his life’s purpose: leaving whites butchered and violated.

One of the most pressing comparisons between the rise of lynching as a barbaric ritual and the attempts of Southern whites to divorce themselves from their perceived crippledom lies in the fact that “the more defenseless, disenfranchised, and intimidated the Negro became, the more prone he was to the ruthless aggression of mobs” (Woodward, *Strange Career* 87). Further, as “the number of lynchings in the country as a
whole declined during the first decade of the twentieth century, the proportion of lynchings committed in the South as well as the proportion of African-American lynching victims steadily increased” (87). In short, while Southern blacks continued to bear a closer and closer resemblance to the servile darkies found in the Uncle Remus stories of Joel Chandler Harris, their treatment bore a closer and closer resemblance to that promoted in the pages of Thomas Dixon. The majority of Southern African Americans may have closed out the nineteenth century barred from the vote in most Southern communities, eking out a living as sharecroppers, and being encouraged by Booker T. Washington to “cast down [their] bucket.” However, they also found themselves characterized as lust-driven criminals seeking a coup d’état over white power, thanks to muckraking newspaper campaigns waged by yellow journalists and unscrupulous politicians, such as Georgia Governor M. Hoke Smith’s series of editorials in the Atlanta Journal. The fostering of such beliefs as the idea that African Americans were “rapidly deteriorating in morals and manners, in health and efficiency” (95) ultimately resulted in whites finding an acceptable scapegoat for their own financial struggles, which had been exacerbated by a series of national panics. Thus, an African American committing such gruesome crimes as Hose was alleged to have done appeared not only to validate such outlandish claims, but also to highlight whites’ own precarious position. Consequently, the resulting violence served as a referendum against not only black potency, but also white impotency.

Starting at the courthouse in Newnan and terminating at the eventual lynching spot under a grove of trees outside town, known locally as Troutman Field or The Points, the mob turned their transporting of Hose into a parade that featured Hose walking at the head and followed by a string of buggies “more than a thousand strong” (Arnold 139). At each corner, the mob would hoist Hose up in the air so that the throngs of onlookers could see him, at which time “ladies waved their handkerchiefs and applauded” (139). Hose would then be dragged to the next corner by the chain around his neck until the crowd left town and headed for the lynching grounds with increased alacrity and urgency. Following the lynching, the lynching party returned to Newnan, where they were “accorded a triumphal entry into the city” (139) and hailed as knights-errant when the townspeople learned that Hose had suffered greatly. Clearly, the town greeted an African American’s promised gruesome and fiery death as if the circus were in town and they were catching an early glimpse at the featured freak.

At the parade’s conclusion, the mob began the bloody deeds of the lynching itself. As soon as Hose was securely bound to a tree with a chain, the torture began as several members of the mob flashed knives at Hose and began slashing at his hands. According to the Massachusetts newspaper the Springfield Weekly Republican, as soon as Hose saw the sun glinting off one of the knives covered with his blood, he began begging the mob to kill him instantly and be done with it. Had the lynching been primarily about justice, the mob might have obliged him; however, “his cries went unheeded” (qtd. in Ginzburg 15). Instead, the crowd—estimated by the Kissimmee Valley Gazette (a Florida newspaper) at “fully 2,000” (10)—was treated to the bloodshed they had crowded railroad platforms in Atlanta to see. As the Newnan Herald and Advertiser would later

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27 Two of Dixon’s novels, The Clansman and The Leopard’s Spots, both of which were installments in Dixon’s popularly read Reconstruction Trilogy, would eventually be adapted by D. W. Griffith in his film The Birth of a Nation.
aver in an unsigned editorial refusing to apologize for the mob’s gory work, “Our culture is uniquely Southern, and we thank God for it” (117) and Hose’s lynching had been a means of protecting this mythological notion of an idyllic South where white men are men and black men are whatever white men want them to be.

According to Dray, Hose’s torture lasted over thirty minutes and “began when a man stepped forward and matter-of-factly sliced off Hose’s ears” (At the Hands 13). Then, other members of the mob came up and removed Hose’s fingers one at a time, pausing after each finger so that it could be “shown to the crowd” (13). All of these mutilations, however, were mere preludes to the apogee of the mutilating process, in which, according to Dray, “a blade was passed between [Hose’s] thighs, Hose cried in agony, and a moment later, his genitals were held aloft” (13). According to several newspaper accounts, the crowd, which had cheered the severing of each individual piece of Hose’s body, roared its loudest approval for Hose’s castration. Further, the Macon Telegraph reported that “many [white] hands [were] cut in the delirious frenzy of the men to perform the bloody task” (qtd. in Arnold 114). Having apparently spilled enough blood, the mob then surrounded Hose with kindling, lit the macabre pyre, and punctuated the whole affair by roasting Hose alive, pulling him out of the flames long enough for him to “confess” his guilt, and ultimately sending him to his violent death. In his final moments, Hose bit down on a piece of wood, “as if it had been an apple” (116), and the freak on display transmogrified into a roasted pig. The day had been a success in the eyes of those present. “Judge Lynch” had allowed vigilante justice to be served and the crowd had witnessed the spectacle that the Atlanta Constitution would christen “The Georgia Exhibition.”

While details of the lynching clearly mark Hose’s death as a show, drawn out to elicit appropriate responses from the crowd, heighten the drama, and make sure everyone got their entertainment dollar’s worth, I would argue that they held an additional purpose that ties them even closer to the freak shows that Americans attended in significant numbers at the turn of the century. If freak shows served to ease American anxieties about their own physical and cultural normalcy by presenting them with bodies that were guaranteed to be comparatively abnormal, the literal disfiguring of Hose’s body leaves him corporeally damaged, specifically when compared to the crowd. By cutting off first his ears and then his fingers, the mob not only made Hose’s body visibly deviant, but also left him with several socially recognizable disabilities, such as deafness. Additionally, unsubstantiated reports also suggest that Hose also had his tongue cut out (Arnold 112), thereby literally depriving him of a voice and further linking him with a physical disability that often led to the asylum. The fact that the first step of the mutilation was to cut off his ears is also significant in that it was the punishment most commonly given to slaves who had struck a white man. Thus, the mob reconfigures Hose’s body in a way that harkens back to the Antebellum Period social order.

Prior to actually maiming Hose’s body, the mob intimidated him by slashing at him with knives and getting him to beg for his death. Such an action places the whites in the mob in control, marking the core attraction that lynching held for Southern communities, as discussed by Andrew Sledd in a 1902 article published in The Atlantic Monthly, entitled “The Negro: Another View.” In his article, Sledd contends it to be a “fundamental” truth that “the Negro belongs to an inferior race” (65). Moreover, he specifically cites Hose and his lynching as proof that the notion of blacks being equal to
whites had been put to rest. Sledd’s contention that Hose’s lynching ended the notion of racial equality suggests that it ameliorated the psychosomatic disability that I argue led to it in the first place.

However, the fact that the town castrated Hose, leaving his body as devoid of definitive classification as many of the most popular sideshow attractions, suggests that freakery, not chivalry, served as the impetus for the mob’s actions. According to Florida’s Kissimme Valley Gazette, an unidentified member of the mob pinned a placard reading “We Must Protect Our Southern Women” to a nearby tree (qtd. in Arnold 11), giving the mob holding Hose’s genitals aloft a quality similar to Arthur pulling Excalibur from the stone. Such an action grants Hose’s genitalia a talismanic quality and turns the lynching into a transfer of power. Whatever power, literal or mythological, the mob imagines Hose’s sex to contain now belongs to the white men of the community. The organ by which Hose had emasculated a community’s white men now belongs to those same men. They have replaced their sense of impotency with the sexual prowess believed to be bound up in the black penis and salved their own sense of disability under the guise of protecting their women.

A similar function can be found in the practice of taking souvenirs, which was a ritualized component of a typical lynching. Members of the mob that lynched Hose kept each of the dismembered body parts mentioned above, and demand for mementos of the lynching ran so high that an advertisement ran in the April 28 edition of the Newnan Herald and Advertiser selling pictures of Hose burning at the stake for fifteen cents apiece (Arnold 15). The lynching-souvenir industry served several symbolic functions. It allowed mob members to reclaim their own sense of physical normalcy. Taking a piece of the lynching victim’s body gave the mob possession of the embodiment of their disability. Owning part of the lynched body, therefore, gave mob members the illusion that they also controlled their disability. While taking lynching souvenirs certainly bears a similarity to a big-game hunter’s collecting the heads of the animals he kills or even a deer hunter’s placing antlers on the wall, the collection of lynching souvenirs is more about regaining a sense of masculinity than about collecting rarities. These souvenirs, however, do provide their owners with a symbol of their empowerment. As was the case in hundreds of other lynchings, many of these souvenirs were displayed in family homes and storefront windows. While such displays certainly attested to the masculinity of their owners when viewed by many other Southern whites and also served as a warning to other African Americans, their display was also about what they symbolized to their owners.

However, these parts of Hose’s body were not the only souvenirs taken from the lynching, nor were they the most gruesome. According to the Springfield Weekly Republican, mob members cut Hose’s heart into several pieces and sold them to members of the crowd. Additionally, “small pieces of bones went for 25 cents and pieces of the liver crisply cooked went for 10 cents” (qtd. in Ginzburg 12). Even more grotesquely, Hose’s knuckles were put up for sale in a local grocery-store window, a venue particularly horrific given the local news accounts of Hose having been “barbequed” as part of his lynching (Dray, At the Hands 14). Like many of the trinkets sold at sideshows, these rather grisly souvenirs provided proof of a person’s attendance and provided a

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28 No copies of the offered image are known to have been located.
reminder of their own comparative normalcy, a reminder that they were higher up on the
food chain than Hose. However, the selling of such macabre artifacts even further
disables and enfreaks Hose’s body as well as the black body in general through
subjecting it to dehumanizing practices that are equal in extremity to Special Forces
soldiers wearing necklaces made out of Vietnamese ears. By making Hose’s body a
commercial commodity, marking it as an item for consumption (possibly even literal
consumption), and further demarcating the line between white normalcy and black
freakery, the citizens of Newnan, Georgia, suggested that the black body was not human,
but instead belonged to a more feral or even teratological category.

Accounts of the lynching suggest that it is this desire to turn Hose into both a
freak and a monster that lies at the heart of the mob’s decision to kill him through
immolation. As the most commonly known method for killing witches, zombies, and
vampires, fire has a long cultural history as the weapon of choice against supernatural
threats. Additionally, news stories of people being burned alive triggered a near-sublime
reaction in late-nineteenth-century readers, provoking simultaneous terror and
fascination. Newspapers daily ran stories about people being “baked,” “charred,”
“roasted,” and “cooked.” Stories such as the burning of the Windsor Hotel in New York
on March 16 of that year particularly terrified their readers through grotesque imagery,
such as burning bodies falling from great heights or children being reduced to ashes
(Arnold 105). In short, fire was a weapon that could be used to provoke fear or to fight
against mythological and metaphorical monsters alike.

While burning humans alive is considered barbaric, even in cultures that the
United States has traditionally scorned as savage, purifying a community through burning
monsters and demons has long been held up as an acceptable religious practice in
Western culture and played a particularly strong role in establishing colonial America’s
first cities on the hill. According to Stuart Banner in The Death Penalty: An American
History, burning had historically been reserved for two types of offenders: slaves who
murdered their masters or plotted rebellion, most famously in the case of Nat Turner, and
women who murdered their husbands (70). It is significant that the two offenses that
warranted burning both involved white men not only being murdered but being
dominated or having their social position threatened by their supposed physical inferiors.
While white rapists and white murderers received the relative mercy of being hanged,
those whose violence threatened to wrest control from whites and cripple the position of
other whites in the community received the “super capital punishment” (71) of
immolation. Thus, when the Atlanta Constitution assured its readers before Hose was
cought that he would be burned, it was suggested that Hose’s capital offense was
exposing the physical impotence of the white men of rural Georgia.

In Exorcising Blackness, Trudier Harris astutely points to the burning of black
bodies as evidence that lynchings were religious rituals for the communities that hosted
them. While I certainly agree with Harris’ arguments, I believe that Hose’s lynching
exemplifies more bodily based motivations as also playing a part in this barbaric practice.
The notion that the community was not just lynching an accused murderer and rapist, but

29 Common folklore stated that even a staked vampire had to be burned before it could be
considered truly destroyed. Staking a vampire through the heart simply held a vampire in a sort of stasis. In
order for it to be permanently killed, it had to be decapitated and then burned through fire or exposure to
sunlight.
slaying a “monster in human form,” is highlighted by accounts of the lynching itself. Multiple accounts report Hose breaking through the chain that bound him to the tree, attempting to run away, and having to be goaded back into the fire by the mob once his body began to burn. Such a depiction grants Hose supernatural characteristics, and based on imagery of his crimson-coated body emerging from rising flames, Satanic ones as well. This use of supernatural imagery corresponds with previous accounts in which Hose appeared like a phantom out of nowhere in the Cranfords’ dining room prior to committing murder and seemed to disappear into thin air as he eluded the manhunt organized to capture him. Such imagery lionizes the members of the mob by transforming them into a collective Beowulf who slew their town’s version of Grendel. Consequently, the lynching site becomes a sort of battleground on which a monstrous emblem of the Civil War and Reconstruction was defeated, thereby publicly reclaiming white Southern bodies as no longer wounded, no longer crippled. Conversely, by being burned to ash, Hose’s body was robbed of form and became even more marked visibly deviant. Consequently, the flames that engulfed his body ultimately created an even starker contrast between him and his tormentors that simultaneously further aggrandized their status and further denigrated his. As a result, through the fire, Hose, whose crimes would the next day be described by the Newnan Herald and Advertiser as a “carnival of blood and lust” (qtd. in Banner 71), was re-molded into a carnival freak and dime museum exhibit.

**Conclusion**

London ends *The Abysmal Brute*, his tale of manhood, as he begins it: with lynching imagery in the form of the mob scene that spreads across the novel’s final pages. Embittered by gambling’s corrupting influences on boxing, Pat Glendon returns to the ring for one last fight. Before the match, he addresses the crowd to deliver an indictment against the entire prizefighting industry. Glendon exposes boxing’s seedy underbelly and outlines the various ways fight promoters run it exclusively on “graft.” In the midst of asserting that the boxing industry is “rotten from top to bottom” and “run on business principles” and reminding the crowd that they “know what those [principles] are” (153), Glendon effortlessly knocks out Jim Hanford, the world champion, with one punch when Hanford charges the ring to dispute Glendon’s claims. With one well-timed punch to the jaw, Glendon publicly pulls up the curtain on the All-Powerful Oz and shows him to be a sham and his title to be a hoax.

Despite the crowd’s initially divisive response to Glendon’s message, his fiery oratory ultimately whips them up and wins the overwhelming majority of them over to his side. This tide of emotions carries throughout Glendon’s fight and spills over as, following the match, mob violence erupts against boxers and promoters alike: “It was not a riot. It was an orgy. Not a seat was left standing. All over the great hall, by main strength, crowding and jostling to lay hands and strength on beams and boards, the crowd uprooted and overturned. Prizefighters sought the protection of the police, but there was not enough police to escort them out, and fighters and managers, and promoters were beaten and battered” (167). After finally being driven from the building, “the crowd fell upon a new seven-thousand dollar motor car belonging to a well-known fight promoter and reduced it to scrap iron and kindling wood” (168) and formed a procession around Glendon’s car as he drove back to the hotel, where they placed him on top of the car and demanded he give them a speech.
While it can be argued that the crowd’s response stems from being cheated out of their money or out of the perceived purity of the sport, in this context, their response clearly comes, at least in part, from having been cheated out of something different altogether. The crowd has been cheated out of Pat Glendon and any other white champions who prowl the squared circle; in fact, they have been cheated out of the very idea of Pat Glendon. During Pat’s first meeting with Maud Sangster, she describes him as a “young man, with the body of a giant, who was one of the kings of bruisers, and who read poetry, and who went to art exhibits, and who experimented with color photography” (87). As a man who has harnessed his masculinity and maintained his manliness, Pat becomes an All-American man: a model that proves to other white men that the eugenic ideals are possible. He becomes tangible proof that white men, and therefore they themselves, harbor the potential to achieve a level of manhood that exceeds all other races. This notion lies behind Pat’s father dubbing him “the hope of the white race” (5). Pat takes this hope from them by revealing the truth about his feats in the ring, such as his knockout of Nat Powers in his previous fight, and then announcing his own retirement from the ring. By leaving boxing and escaping back into the same woods he came from, Pat Glendon goes from being the Great White Hope to being the Great White Myth, one of those figures about whom in years to come people will hear tales without being completely sure whether or not he actually existed.

In fact, Glendon’s speech not only robs them of hope, but puts each of the members of the crowd in position to feel his own lack of manhood. Glendon, therefore, reminds the men in the audience of their relative smallness in comparison to the corporate and industrial world and of the powerlessness that many of them likely face in their own jobs. He reminds all those in the crowd at the middle of the ladder and below just how helpless they are in their own lives. Further, by showing how he himself has been manipulated and coerced into submitting to these same principles, Glendon shows how even he, a “thoroughbred” (109) and a “fit dweller among giants” (135), is relatively powerless. The revelation of a white male icon’s inherent weakness leaves the crowd feverish to prove its own collective masculinity.

The crowd’s feelings of emasculation as well as London’s description of the mob scene show how the crowd’s uprising connects to period lynchings, such as Sam Hose’s, in terms of both its impetus and its goals. By destroying the arena and the promoter automobiles purchased through racketeering, the members of the mob destroy visible reminders of their own controlled manhood. They reassert control over objects that were purchased and constructed through the manipulation of their hope and the extortion of their need to believe in a paragon of white masculinity. By physically battering the boxers and promoters alike, the mob treats these supposed symbols of masculinity the way the mob in Newnan treated Sam Hose. By imposing their physical will on the boxers and promoters, leaving them sprawled out unconscious and bruised, they literally place

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30 In addition to being Pat’s eventual love interest, Maud is a Nellie Bly–style reporter for San Francisco’s largest newspaper.
31 The phrase “The Great White Hope” was coined by London in 1908. London intended the phrase to refer to a boxer strong enough to defeat Jack Johnson.
32 During this period, boxing crowds were traditionally all male. It is, therefore, significant for the purposes of this chapter that London sets the riot scene at a boxing match, thereby underscoring the notion that mob rule centered on protecting women.
themselves above them and purge their own sense of physical inferiority. The riot
becomes a collective purging of pent-up masculinity and a reminder of their own primal
status as men. It becomes not just “an orgy,” but also a carnival of blood and lust.

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Chapter 3  Lifting the Veil: Double Consciousness and the Construction of American Normalcy

Early in The Autobiography of Malcolm X, Malcolm excitedly gets his hair straightened for the first time, asking his friend Shorty to give him that milestone first conk. As Shorty combs the conolene, a concoction that includes a full can of Red Devil lye, into Malcolm’s hair, he warns him that any of it that gets left in Malcolm’s scalp will “burn a sore into [his] head” (55). At first, Malcolm takes the burning from the lye relatively calmly; however, he soon bellows out in pain as his “head [catches] fire” (55), just before the lye starts burning to the degree that it feels like it is “raking [his] skin off” (55). Once his hair has been rinsed out and combed back, however, Malcolm takes his first look at himself in the mirror, a moment that “blots out all the hurting” (56). His first look at his straight red hair in the mirror, hair “as straight as any white man’s” (56), leaves him amazed as he witnesses the “transformation from a lifetime of kinks” (56).

For Malcolm, it is worth enduring the pain from coating his scalp with a chemical that can burn a hole in a bathtub in order to have hair that looks like a white man’s: hair that erases part of his blackness. At this moment, Malcolm underwent a metaphorical baptism by fire, after which his hair was always straightened until he converted to the Nation of Islam almost twenty years later.

Malcolm’s experiences here are hardly unique. Rather, they are emblematic of the thousands upon thousands of black men and women who risked pain, injury, and even permanent scarring in order to look as white as possible at the turn of the twentieth century, the boom period for hair-straightening and skin-lightening products. While African Americans had long used the same concoction Shorty uses on Malcolm—a mixture of potatoes, eggs, and lye—the turn of the twentieth century saw a significant increase in the number of commercial hair-straightening and skin-lightening products available at American drugstores. Invented in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1899 by Garrett Morgan, the first commercial hair straightener was composed primarily of the same chemicals used to clean sewing-machine needles, a compound that included highly poisonous red mercury. Scores of rival concoctions followed Morgan’s formula. In addition, Morgan opened the marketplace for other tangential inventions, such as Madam C. J. Walker’s straightening comb.

Similarly, skin bleaches that were used to lighten African-American skin tones up to six shades—such as Morgan’s own Bleecheen, among others—also contained a dangerous array of chemicals, including mercury, lead, carbolic acid, mercuric chloride, arsenic, and an assortment of other corrosive materials. Not only did these materials lead to many African Americans suffering significant skin burns that left permanent scarring, but they also led to many African Americans dying from blood poisoning as a result of the products being applied excessively in hopes that they would produce optimal results. Despite their potentially fatal side effects, these products achieved a popularity that led to several of their inventors, including Morgan and Walker, joining the small class of America’s first black millionaires. These products, as well as the fervor surrounding them, indicate more than just a beauty trend or even a desire to escape the harshness of racism and white hegemony; they also represent a deeper cultural impulse in Turn-of-the-Century America.

According to Malcolm X, his first conk was his “first big step toward self-degradation” (56) and represented the average African American’s “shame that he is
black” (57). Further, Malcolm excoriates the multitude of blacks who willingly “violate and mutilate their own God-given bodies in order to look pretty by white standards” (57). This willingness to endure self-mutilation to erase the stigma of blackness first exploded at the onset of the twentieth century. By stripping away indications of blackness, whether by using hair straightener or “through purchasing a skin bleach cream, New Negroes . . . in the U.S. embraced their fledgling status as consumer citizens” (Lindsey 98). Further, many African Americans “embraced beauty culture as means to political, social, economic, and cultural freedom” (111), a cultural belief that stemmed from the Antebellum Period, in which “lighter skin often equaled freedom” (101). The scores of advertisements for these products found in black periodicals of the period reaffirmed these associations and presented “skin lightening as a vehicle for social mobility” (103). In short, African Americans viewed these products as a road to a metamorphosis in which they shed their blackness and re-emerged as “normal” Americans. Consequently, hair straightening and skin lightening took Du Bois’ concept of double consciousness and mapped it out across thousands upon thousands of black bodies willing to risk one form of enfreakment in order to rid themselves of another.

Examining double consciousness shows its connection to the construction both of the freak and of carefully crafted public selves. Double consciousness usually left African Americans with a choice of either exhibiting a subterfuge of accommodationism or becoming enfreaked. Moreover, an analysis of the autobiographies of Booker T. Washington and Helen Keller extends double consciousness beyond its traditional racial terrain by exploring the incongruities between their public images and their private selves. More than simply a race-based phenomenon, double consciousness was an overarching mode of identity politics for those enfreaked by eugenics and the wound culture of Turn-of-the-Century America. It therefore serves as a means to investigate the schizophrenic identities of the undesirable class during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Consequently, double consciousness reveals the cultural dichotomy that forced so many people to choose between citizenship and bodily identity, between normalcy and enfreakment, and between being an American or being an exhibit in the American dime museum.

Feeling One’s Two-ness: Exploring Double Consciousness
In “Of Our Spiritual Strivings,” the opening essay of The Souls of Black Folk (1903), W. E. B. Du Bois discusses the term double consciousness. According to Du Bois:

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with a second sight in this American world, a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amusement and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two un-reconciled; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (10-11)

1 Du Bois first coined the term in an 1897 Atlantic Monthly article entitled “Strivings of the Negro People.”
Through this passage, Du Bois illustrates two different ways that double consciousness impacts African-American identity. First, he argues that white Americans, not African Americans, determine what it means to be black. Whites, according to Du Bois, establish the framework of what blackness is by defining it primarily in terms of what whiteness is not. Part of this definition of blackness comes from crude, white-imposed stereotypes, stereotypes that oppose how whites see themselves. Examples of such stereotypes include physical traits, such as coal-black skin and exaggerated facial features, but also moral qualities, such as shiftlessness, kleptomania, and hypersexuality. Blackness, according to Du Bois, does not have its own recognized cultural identity, but is instead is defined as the antithesis of whiteness. Consequently, each Negro’s identity is not only constantly in a state of flux, but is also dependent on how white people define themselves. In short, according to Du Bois, Negroes are not only an Other, but an Other that lacks an identity beyond that of “not white,” “not an insider,” or “not normal.”

Du Bois, however, also discusses double consciousness as a splitting of African-American identity into two distinct halves, or “warring ideals.” According to Du Bois, every African American’s identity has a black half and an American half. Du Bois describes this split as a full-fledged schism: he claims that African Americans can choose to be Negroes or they can choose to be Americans, but they cannot choose to be both. Thus, because the eugenics movement culture established the term American as both synonymous with whiteness and diametrically opposed to blackness, every African American is saddled with a sort of sociological schizophrenia. Du Bois states that African Americans wish neither to “Africanize America” nor to “bleach [their] Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism” (11). Rather, he argues that African Americans want “to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face” (11). This culturally imposed internal dichotomy forces African Americans to choose which parts of themselves they are going to suppress and which parts they are going to embrace. Moreover, it also sends the message that, in order to be an accepted part of American society, they have to pass, or at least masquerade, as white on one level or another.

Here, Du Bois voices a concept that had become official US policy with the Supreme Court’s 1896 decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which declared that Jim Crow and all of the second-class citizenship it bestowed on African Americans was constitutional. Thus, the one-drop rule became an official marker of one’s status as an American and determined whether one was a fully protected American citizen or a Negro. In fact, the notion of double consciousness had lain at the heart of Homer Plessy’s decision to file suit after being ejected from a Louisiana railroad car in 1892. Plessy, who was a blonde-haired, blue-eyed octoroon, did not sue solely to end segregation, but also to be immunized from Jim Crow and treated as a white man. Understanding that he could not be both, Plessy sued to be treated as an American rather than as a Negro.

Double consciousness figures predominantly in postbellum literature and culture, from the 1890s poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar through the end of the Harlem Renaissance. Examples of double consciousness abounding in postbellum black thought

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2 The one-drop rule was a legal principle of racial classification that was prominent during the Jim Crow era. Under this rule, any person with even one ancestor of African origin was considered to be Negro.

3 For a full discussion of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, see T. Davis; Hoffer; and Medley.
include the speaker of many Langston Hughes poems arguing that “[he] too, [is] America” and giving the Nile and the Mississippi equal weight in creating his identities. Moreover, Zora Neale Hurston used the term African American as a way of insisting upon both sides of her identity being recognized as equally significant to her makeup, fully capable of existing in tandem with one another, and forming a unique cultural identity that is more than simply “not white.” Further, double consciousness can be seen in action throughout the lynchings that dominate the lynching era, such as the case of the Sam Hose lynching. Faced with the return of an accused murderer and rapist, the citizens could choose to treat him as an American and give him a trial with a jury of his peers, or they could choose to treat him as a Negro and lynch him. The events following Hose being seized by the mob suggest that the first of those options was never considered and that both Hose and the local African-American population were going to be forced to feel the weight of their culturally defined blackness.

Nella Larsen’s novel *Passing* (1929) shows the motivations behind many African Americans shifting their racial phenotype or straightening their hair. Throughout the novel, Larsen presents a series of African-American characters who demonstrate the wide spectrum of racial identity. These characters include Clare and Gertrude, both of whom pass for white and are married to white men; Irene, who is light enough to pass but chooses not to; Brian, Irene’s dark-skinned husband, who takes pride in his blackness; and Jack, Clare’s white husband, whose definition of blackness comes out of his racism. While many critics and scholars have frequently focused on the novel’s treatment of passing in terms of sexuality, my interest in *Passing* involves the way it exhibits double consciousness as an impetus for African-American identity and as the catalyst for both racial politics and racial violence. Throughout the novel, Larsen continually demonstrates the ways in which what it means to be black is determined by members of the white community. Even minor white characters—such as Clare’s white aunts, who put her to work cleaning toilets because that is the sort of Washingtonian labor that they see as appropriate for blacks—construct black identity. However, it is Clare’s husband, Jack Bellew, whom Larsen elects to serve as the mouthpiece for white America’s definition of blackness. Upon revealing his hatred of “the black scrimy devils” (40), Jack admits that he has never met any African Americans. He contends, however, that he knows people who have; furthermore, he has “read in the papers about them” and how they are “always robbing and killing people and . . . worse” (41). Thus, not only does Jack define blackness as involving the worst sort of criminal and hypersexual stereotypes, but he does so based on the sole authority of other whites. It is through the voice of his white associates and the white press that Jack claims to know exactly what it means to be black in America. In Jack’s view, the only role for an African American is to threaten white property, white lives, and white mores. In short, blackness is by definition set up not only as apart from American society, but as an enemy to it. In the eyes of the Jack
Bellews of the world, one could no more be both black and American than one could be both Communist and American. Jack further draws these lines of separation when he boldly (and erroneously) boasts to Irene, “No niggers in my family. Never have been and never will be” (40). While Jack is directly referring to his blood family, his description of African Americans suggests that he means his national family as well. Moreover, the fact that Jack accepts Clare as his wife suggests that her decision to pass has involved more than getting by on an ambiguous phenotype and that she has, in fact, been forced to suppress an entire side of her identity, a decision that has left her “yearning to be around Negroes again” in an effort to restore the part of her identity that she feels isolated from.

The fact that Jack, as a white man, claims to understand the black condition and what being black entails illustrates the weight that whites have in constructing black cultural identity. If a white man decides that being black means automatically having any particular trait or demonstrating any particular stereotype, then that trait or stereotype becomes a defining characteristic of blackness and applies to any African American. The inculcation of this mindset throughout white culture can be found in the hordes of whites in the novel who descend on Harlem every Friday and Saturday night to “gaze on the Negroes” (70) and who form their definition of black culture from the zoot suits that parade up and down 125th Street, the bootleg liquor overflowing at the speakeasies, and the musicians performing at the Cotton Club. For these individuals—even if, like Hugh Wentworth and the rest of the NWL, they appear on the surface to be interested in black affairs—blackness is an exoticism, something to be experienced only by stepping out of the confines of home and entering the alien world of Harlem. Jack, however, moves beyond the simple ignorance of an undergraduate using Wikipedia as an essay’s lone source when he claims that those white sources he relies on know African Americans “better than they know themselves” (41). Thus, whites are not only a legitimate source for constructing black identity, but the only legitimate source. In fact, even if an African American were to dare to proffer forth a vision of what it means to be black, unless that vision was congruent with the white vision, it would be disregarded. Thus, Larsen demonstrates that whites determine what blackness is not only for other whites, but for African Americans as well.

Jack’s nicknaming Clare “Nig” further demonstrates the power that this white definition of blackness has over African-American identity. Jack means this pet name as a playful barb at his wife’s skin tone darkening by the year. However, both this moniker and his assertion that she is “trying to turn into [a nigger]” (40) have clearly influenced Clare’s definition of herself and have also influenced what she does, what she says, and even what she believes. When Jack first calls Clare “Nig” in front of Irene and Gertrude, Clare makes sure that both Irene and Gertrude heard him before joining Jack in laughter at his explanation for why he calls her that. Such a response shows that this term does not hold the same emotional charge for Clare as it does for Irene, who silently stews in response to Jack’s behavior. This difference in their reactions suggests that Clare no longer identifies with it as a black woman, the way Irene does, but instead as a white American upper-middle-class housewife. Clare has decided to identify herself as

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8 The NWL, or Negro Welfare League, is Larsen’s fictional version of the NAACP, with Hugh Wentworth as its president. Larsen presents Wentworth’s concern for African-American welfare as a façade and as an excuse to attend social gatherings.
American, a decision that serves as a foil to Brian’s yearning to forsake his American identity and move to Brazil, where he will be free to be black.

Prior to Jack’s intrusion into the tea party, Irene, Clare, and Gertrude have a discussion about children that underscores the self-hatred implicit in Clare’s decision to forsake her blackness. Throughout the conversation, both Clare and Gertrude discuss a dark complexion and a potentially dark child as “it,” granting them the same status as a disease or birth defect. In fact, Gertrude proclaims that “it’s awful the way it skips a generation and then pops out” (36), thereby placing darkness on the same level as cerebral palsy or spina bifida. Moreover, Gertrude’s comment shows that, through their decision to pass, Clare and Gertrude have come to view blackness on the same Great Chain of Being that had been used three generations previously to enslave their ancestors. Further, Gertrude punctuates her views on children by proclaiming, “Of course, nobody wants a dark child” (36). This sweeping generalization is made with the assumption “that her audience [is] in complete agreement with her” (36) and is followed by a cartoonish overreaction filled with both fear and astonishment to Irene proudly telling of her own dark children. Therefore, like Clare, Gertrude has so swallowed Jack’s vision of blackness that she cannot fathom someone openly admitting that she and her children are black, let alone being proud of it. Not only does she feel her own citizenship threatened by Irene’s blackness, but she cannot understand why Irene has eschewed the Americanization offered by passing and instead found some sort of contentment in being black.

Fractured Bodies, Fractured Identities: Expanding Double Consciousness

While double consciousness is commonly associated with racial identity and African-American studies, it can be applied to disability studies as well. Simi Linton provides an example of the role of double consciousness in disabled identity through her discussion of visiting an elementary school on school-picture day in Claiming Disability. While there, Linton learns that the school traditionally takes the pictures on the auditorium stage, rather than in a location accessible to all students. In the case of handicapped students, they are lifted out of their wheelchairs, carried up on the stage, and placed in folding chairs to have their photographs taken. Such an action, Linton contends, tells these disabled students that they “are just like everybody else, but only as long as [they] hide or minimize [their] disability” (21). Here, the school defines disability not only as something that can be overcome, but as something that must be overcome at all costs. Moreover, it provides the children with a distinct choice concerning their identity; either they can be members of their class or they can be disabled. They cannot, however, be both. According to Linton, the school’s intentions are irrelevant; its actions force these children to adopt a shroud of normalcy for the sake of projecting an image of a healthy, All-American school. Further, “the loss of community, the anxiety, and the enormous self-doubt are the costs of declaring disability unacceptable” (21). While the school is clearly making a public statement that disability has no place in its community, it is also telling these children that they themselves have no place in it so long as they continue to be marked by disability.

Although the children being photographed are clearly being told that their place in their school community is tenuous at best, these photographs will also affect future generations of children to an equal, if not greater, degree. By being removed from the physical markers of their disability and being photographed in a manner reminiscent of
President Franklin Roosevelt attempting to hide his own wheelchair, not only are these children being sent the message that only “normal” children are allowed to be part of the school, but they are also contributing to these adults’ false projections concerning the nature of disability. Whatever the effect on national morale of Roosevelt’s decision to be photographed only from the chest up, and whether or not it created a double consciousness in the President himself, it certainly sent a trio of messages to other disabled Americans:

1. An American is strong and virile.
2. A disabled body is neither strong nor virile.
3. You can be a valued citizen in this country so long as you suppress any disabled or non-normative facet to your identity and masquerade as something you are not.

Similarly, these children are sending the message to future disabled children that the only way for them to be accepted as members of the school is to pass as able-bodied and suppress a portion of their own identity.

As in the case of many African Americans who chose to pass, the cumulative effect of a community full of schools such as the one Linton discusses can lead those with disabilities toward self-hatred and a self-imposed decision to pass whenever possible. In his essay “The Visible Cripple,” Mark Jeffreys provides an example of this phenomenon in the form of his adopted brother Jim, a congenital amputee whose adopted family took him to be fitted with a pair of DuPont-constructed artificial legs as soon as possible. According to Jeffreys, this decision was not made in an effort to provide Jim with some sort of comfort, as he was much more comfortable in his wheelchair and claimed that the legs felt alien and cumbersome. Rather, the decision was part of an effort “to mainstream Jim as much as possible” by “making him appear as normal as possible” (35). While this particular instance clearly brings about echoes of Donna Harraway’s cyborg theory, it more directly shows the ways in which society over the past 130 years has defined both disability and acceptability, at least in terms of appearance, by “construct[ing] bodies as it pleased” (35). Using this social definition, Jim’s parents further instilled him with the importance of belonging to the cult of normalcy by making him “as unobtrusive in his appearance as possible” (35). Jim’s artificial normalcy comes at the cost of extraordinary discomfort and clearly connects to Malcolm X’s decision to endure the pain of conking his hair in order to make himself feel closer to white. From society’s and his adoptive family’s imposing these unwanted monstrosities on him at an early age, Jim learned that in order to be a member of society and a member of his adoptive family, he could not also be obviously or publicly disabled. Disability had clearly been defined for him as something even more unnatural than a set of metal legs and as an unacceptable choice for a public identity.

While Jim’s family often coerced him into passing as able-bodied, he occasionally chose to pass of his own free will. Jeffreys provides evidence of this shift through his discussion of a photo taken at their sister’s wedding. Even though Jim had not been regularly using his artificial legs for years by the time of the wedding, he still wore them for formal occasions. However, when the family portrait was taken, Jim was photographed not only wearing his artificial legs, but also without his crutches, forcing him to balance himself on his brothers. The photo, Jeffreys claims, produced the desired
effect of creating an “invisible cripple” (36). Thus, Jim willingly allowed a portion of his identity to be erased in order to allow both himself and his family to pass as “normal.” Most interestingly, however, Jim is not the only one passing in the photo. In addition to Jim, his father, who suffering from brittle-bone syndrome, and two of his brothers, one of whom suffered from spina bifida and another who had been stricken with polio as a child, all posed without wheelchairs or any other form of prosthetic support. In fact, even their able-bodied sister, who had recently broken her leg, had her crutches taken away for the photo. The result is a photograph that presents a “normal” American family at the expense of masking that family’s full identity.

Thus, the photo features a double layer of passing. On one level, it features each individual attempting to pass as both a member of the family and a member of mainstream society. In this way, each individual is attempting to pretend that he or she belongs among the able-bodied, even if only for this special evening, similar to the way Irene passes as white to enjoy tea at the Drayton, like a white lady of social standing, in Passing’s opening scene. They not only are willing to make concessions to their identity, but volunteer to do so of their own accord. However, on another level, it illustrates the family as a whole attempting to pass as a “normal” family, hiding the irregularities and amputations of their own bodies the way other families hide bruises after a domestic dispute, a mixed racial identity, or skeletons in the closet. Whether they posed for the photo in this way out of some sort of genuine desire to “look their best” or out of a subconscious urge, the photo represents the family responding to their cultural training and their awareness of a socially imposed double consciousness that prevents them from feeling like legitimate members of their community so long as their bodies betray their disability.

As it does with African Americans, double consciousness affects the way mainstream society defines what it means to be disabled in an effort to deny the disabled full citizenship and thereby allay its own anxieties. Lennard Davis discusses democracy’s need for “the illusion of equality” and how equality itself depends on “the fiction of the equal or average citizen” (Bending 104). This need for an average citizen, someone who can fill the role of John Q. Public, has consistently led America in search of “an ideology that will support and generate the aims of normalcy” (104). While the American definition of “normal” has traditionally been a straight white male Protestant of at least middle-class means, disability threatens such a definition. Davis exemplifies his discussion of American normalcy through the interchangeability of the average late-nineteenth-century worker, eventually arriving at a syllogism: “If all workers are created equal and all workers are citizens, then all citizens must have standard bodies to be able to fit into the industrial-political notion of democracy, equality, and normality” (105). This direct link between a person’s potential for commoditization and a person’s citizenship casts aberrant or unruly bodies as a threat to American labor. Disabled bodies become a symbolic crack in the capitalist foundation whose presumed weakness leaves them the antithesis of American muscle. In short, their assumed inability to serve as a valued member of the American workforce leaves disabled Americans’ citizenship in the same precarious position of conceptual impossibility as that of African Americans following Plessy v. Ferguson.

Contrary to supposed American values, this non-citizenship conferred upon the disabled stems from the individualization inherent in disability. The extensive splintering
of the concerns of a group as widely varied as the disabled has left many scholars commenting on how the disabled as a group must find some sort of a collective identity of their own if they are ever to escape the shadows of marginalization. More problematic, however, the individualized nature of each person’s disability serves as a physical marker, like gender or race, of that person’s inescapable difference from the cult of normalcy that Davis describes as the core of American democracy. The further implications of this issue can be found in Tobin Siebers’ discussion of narcissism, which he defines as “a form of violent hyperindividualization imposed on victims by political bodies and other groups” (48), pointing out that “people with disabilities are automatically assumed to be narcissistic” (48). This presumption stems chiefly from the assumption made by the non-disabled that disability always requires special accommodations, a problem that leads to the perception that disabled rights are “based on special rights and not civil rights” (48). This belief that the disabled are trying to place themselves higher than the average American on the social ladder has the potential to be expressed in a variety of ways, each of which defines the disabled in terms decided upon by those who consider themselves “normal” Americans. For example, this belief leads to those who believe the disabled to be a drain on public resources and resent their tax dollars paying for social programs and SSDI stipends seeing the disabled as a parallel to the systemic “welfare mama.” When carried to a more dangerous conclusion, however, this conferred narcissism has the potential to lead to the same sense of bitter entitlement, economic frustration, and cultural fear that enveloped many white Southerners during the Redemption and eventually led to the KKK, Jim Crow laws, and the blatant violation of African Americans’ constitutional rights. It therefore threatens to define the disabled as spoiled children at best and as second-class citizens, or even non-citizens, at worst.

This sense of non-citizenship further manifests itself in the widespread perception of disabled bodies as being exotic. As a result of this perception, disabled bodies were displayed in freak shows—originally on midways and in circuses, and later on movie screens. Being displayed this way turns the disabled from Americans into immigrants. Exploitative films, such as The Terror of Tiny Town (1938), Chained for Life (1952), and most famously Freaks, point to the various ways in which Americans exoticized the disabled body. However, relegating disability to the realm of the exotic “demedicalizes, fascinates, and seduces with exaggeration, creating a sensationalized, embellished alien” (Garland-Thomson, Extraordinary Bodies 66). The use of the term “alien” is particularly revelatory here: it situates the disabled as immigrants, along with all of the pejoratives and baggage that accompany such a classification. However, whether the disabled fall into the category of the “huddled masses yearning to breathe free” (58) that Emma Lazarus speaks of in her poem “The New Colossus,” survivors of the Middle Passage being hawked as chattel in the markets of New Orleans, or unwelcome burdens on the American economy, connecting the disabled to immigrants problematizes their claims to citizenship. Immigrants become American citizens only when “real” Americans decide that they have assimilated and amalgamated enough and hidden away as much of their exoticism as possible. Moreover, unlike in the cases of immigrants, there is no possibility of a Back to Africa Movement, a Chinese Exclusion Act, or an act of the Arizona state

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9 For a full discussion of movies as freak shows, see Chapter 5.
10 For a full discussion of Freaks, see Chapter 5.
legislature. The disabled are the aliens that we are stuck with until we can institutionalize them or figure out a way for them to pass as able-bodied. Such exoticism then defines the disabled as those who must be naturalized before they can escape the marginalization, both figurative and literal, that many of them experience on a daily basis.

Such a portrayal of the disabled has other implications as well. Garland-Thomson points out that “[t]he visual rhetoric of the exotic presents disabled figures as alien, distant, often sensationalized, eroticized, or entertaining in their difference” (*Extraordinary Bodies* 65). Such a view suggests a minstrelization of the disabled, with exaggerated versions of amputees, dwarfs, and clubfeet replacing the blackfaced antics of Stepin Fetchit, Mammy, and Jump Jim Crow. It explains the cultural force behind the place where Violet and Daisy Hilton were conjoined finding itself as much a center of sexual fantasy and speculation as the myths of hypersexuality that surrounded Sarah Baartman and Jezebel. Moreover, it allows such terms as gimp, cripple, and freak to sit comfortably side by side with spook, coon, and nigger. Essentially, it reduces disabled Americans to a stereotype, a caricature, and an epithet. It defines the disabled as a source of scorn, ridicule, and perversion, but never as legitimate citizens who have legitimate rights that need to be taken seriously. It saddles the disabled with the same problems that Sambo stories and comics placed on the shoulders of African Americans. Disabled characters in literature and film have traditionally been constructed so that their “bodily configurations operate as spectacles, eliciting responses from other characters or producing rhetorical effects that depend on disability culture’s resonance” (*Extraordinary Bodies* 9). Thus, the token black guy has been joined by the token crippled guy with much the same effect and impact.

On the opposite end of the spectrum lie many of the cartes de visite distributed at sideshows. These images typically presented their subjects in one of two distinct ways. On one hand, they frequently situated the freak in a setting that exacerbated their freakishness and exoticness. The most famous examples of this brand of carte de visite are the collection of promotional images of William Henry Johnson, P. T. Barnum’s “What Is It?” exhibit, taken by esteemed Civil War photographer Matthew Brady. The photographs in question feature Johnson donning a black fur suit and grass skirt, posing in front of a stereotypical African background, and holding a rudimentary staff in his hand. The end result is a promotional image that heightens perceptions of Johnson, who was really a dockworker from New Jersey, as both savage and xenotypical. He acquires a uniquely doubled identity that straddles the lines between human and beast, an identity that corresponds with the position many African Americans found themselves in of being trapped between blackness and citizenship.

11 *The Story of Little Black Sambo* is a children’s book written and illustrated by Helen Bannerman, first published in 1899. The book’s success led to many widely available pirated versions that presented the title character with a series of racial stereotypes similar to those found in minstrel shows.

12 Popular during the late nineteenth century, cartes de visite were postcard-sized photographs commonly sold at tourist attractions and entertainment venues.
On the other end of the spectrum were those cartes de visite that placed disabled bodies in situations that attempted to normalize them. The most famous example of this manipulation of disabled identity is easily the image of Tom Thumb and his wife Lavinia Warren with a child falsely attributed as theirs, also taken by Brady. In the image, husband and wife smile while holding a newborn infant, providing the image of what would become the nuclear family. However, such a photo serves more to accentuate the diminished height of the two dwarfs (particularly in the light of the long dress worn by the infant, which makes the baby appear to be the same size as both of the adults), to raise speculation about their sex lives, and to suggest the preposterousness of two physical anomalies living as a normal American family.

Two events in 1883 demonstrate the connections between the normalization and enfreakment of aberrant bodies. The two events in question were Sir Francis Galton publishing his work on the bell curve in *Inquiries into Human Faculty and Its Development* and Alexander Graham Bell delivering his famous speech “Memoir upon the Formation of a Deaf Variety of the Human Race.” In his speech, Bell attempted to arouse mainstream America’s fear about “the tendency among deaf-mutes to select deaf-mutes as their partners in marriage,” thereby posing the threat that “a race of deaf people might be created” (qtd. in L. Davis, *Enforcing* 32). According to Lennard Davis, the speech, along with Galton’s research, highlighted “evolution, fingerprinting, and the attempt to control the reproductive rights of the deaf as all pointing to a concept of the body as perfectible but only when subject to the necessary control of the eugenicists” (32). Consequently, not only did these concepts, along with the bell curve, create the notion of “abnormal” bodies polluting the white race or even forming a race of their own, but they also, as far as the eugenicists were concerned, lumped together all undesirable

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13 It was in this work that Galton coined the word eugenics.

14 Bell would become one of North America’s most famous eugenicists.
traits. This conflation of physical, moral, and economic flaws led to criminals, the poor, and the disabled all being mentioned as equally unorthodox (Bending 39; Enforcing 35). In effect, the burgeoning eugenics movement imposed a form of double consciousness by criminalizing bodies that did not measure up to the standards of national fitness. Consequently, it birthed the notion that a body itself could be degenerate.

Most of the more famous eugenics speeches from the nineteenth century deal with various forms of medical disability. However, the notion of normal and abnormal bodies clearly taps into the white fears of miscegenation and a reversal of the racial hierarchy that arose during Reconstruction. Additionally, it connects to the long-standing use of scientific racism as “proof” of the subhuman nature of African Americans. Further, the notion of corporeal aberration stigmatizing a group echoes the Curse of Ham, the traditional Christian defense to American slavery. It therefore appears to be less than coincidental that the birth of the eugenics movement not only comes a mere year after the start of the lynching era, but also comes at the beginning of the golden age of the American freak show. Rather, the notion of normalcy serves as an ideological touchstone for both of these social phenomena. From sideshows segregating bodies that defied the laws of nature in a sort of teratological zoo to lynching providing a carnivalesque forum for public executions, each of these perverse forms of entertainment has double consciousness at its core. They are each rituals that provide for the construction, containment, and eradication of freakery to salve the fears of the rest of the nation concerning their own able-bodiedness and enforce a specific construct of normalcy.

“Throwing Off the Mask” and Booker T. Washington

In late October 1901, a group of angry Louisiana citizens hired a hit man to kill a prominent African American. Two weeks earlier, the intended target had committed what the Memphis Scimitar had deemed to be “the most damnable outrage which has ever been perpetrated” (D. Davis 207), an event the Raleigh Morning Post simply called “monstrous” (208). The offending party accused of not knowing his place in society was not a suspected murderer or rapist destined for a lynching, nor was he a supposedly lascivious paramour guilty of proposing to a white woman. Instead, he was America’s most famous accommodationist: Booker T. Washington. The crime in question? On October 16 of that year, he had accepted an invitation from President Theodore Roosevelt to dine with him at the White House. The editor of the Charleston Messenger claimed that the actions of this one black man had ruined race relations in the South—relations that he claimed had previously been “better than ever before”—and predicted in the same column that there would be “hell to pay” (215). Indeed, South Carolina Senator “Pitchfork” Ben Tillman bellowed that the incident in question “will necessitate our killing a thousand niggers in the South before they learn their place again” (227). Consequently, a band of Louisianans hired a would-be assassin to kill the man

15 For a full discussion of the eugenics movement, see Chapter 1.
16 Appearing in Genesis 9:20-27, the Curse of Ham comes from Ham looking at the drunk and naked body of his father, Noah. Many nineteenth-century Americans claimed that the resulting curse placed by Noah on Ham’s son Canaan (described as “dark of skin”) was proof of black people’s genetic inferiority.
17 For historical accounts of President Roosevelt inviting Washington to dinner, see D. Davis; see also Norrell.
responsible for offending the deepest of Southern sensibilities. The plan was for the hired killer to travel to Alabama by train, jump off before he got to his final station, and slip into town unnoticed. The plan backfired only when he fell off the train, injured himself in the fall, and wound up receiving medical treatment by his intended target, thereby prompting a change of heart. While the sentiments expressed here are fairly typical of the type of racial commentary expressed in the South at the turn of the twentieth century, the fact that this instance involved Booker T. Washington simply answering a dinner invitation magnifies the importance of this particular “offense.”

President Roosevelt also received his share of criticism, with the Memphis Commercial Appeal calling it a “blunder worse than a crime” (207). Some Southern newspapers even predicted the immediate obliteration of the President’s further political aspirations, arguing that the dinner had “undone the work of his life” and that his actions had been traitorous to both his Georgia-born mother and his Southern constituents. However, in the worst of the press’ excoriation of President Roosevelt, he served primarily as a vehicle to aim racist commentary at Washington. Examples of this sort of race-baiting include Louisville, Kentucky’s Courier-Journal speculating on “Teddy and Booker hobnobbing over their possum and potatoes” (207), and the Geneva Reaper, a small Alabama newspaper, averring that Roosevelt had been permanently tainted by his dinner with Washington and that “the scent of that coon [would] follow him to the grave” (208). Clearly, his decision to dine with Booker T. had transformed Roosevelt from a beacon of virile manhood with boundless popularity in the South to a race traitor who had been permanently infected by his proximity to Washington and his blackness.

Washington, however, served as the clear center of the controversy and the primary target of Southern outrage. In addition to an onslaught of venomous newspaper articles and editorials, Washington found himself the target of political cartoons, fiery speeches that combined Christian obligation and racist rhetoric, and even songs that evoked the minstrel tradition at its most vulgar. Much of the vehemence of the South’s response, I argue, came from the incongruity between Washington’s acceptance of President Roosevelt’s dinner invitation and the persona he had crafted for himself in Up from Slavery, the autobiography that he had published earlier that same year. Throughout Up from Slavery, Washington presented himself as blindly patriotic both to the United States and to the South in particular, accommodationist in his racial views, and apolitical in issues that existed outside of the racial sphere. In short, Washington presented himself as the ideological clone of the legions of white Americans who set the standards for normalcy.18 Consequently, he constructed a public self that allowed him to transcend the stigma of freakery imposed on him by his blackness.19 Thus, he appeared to have chosen to become an American at the expense of abandoning his blackness. Through his infamous White House dinner as well as other writings that provided a picture of his true politics, Washington revealed his blackness and became guilty of the sin of attempting to shatter the limits of double consciousness by living simultaneously as an American citizen and as a black man. His autobiography served as an attempt to escape the racial enfreakment that many Americans, especially Southerners, had imposed on African Americans.

18 For further discussion of Washington’s desire to be seen as a bastion of normalcy, see Sehat.
19 For further discussion of Washington constructing a public self, see Harlan; Norrell; West; and Willard.
Even a cursory glance at *Up from Slavery* provides clear evidence of Washington’s accommodationist politics, views that have ultimately led to his name becoming a synonym for “Uncle Tom.” In effect, the text constructs a persona that matches his address at the 1895 Atlanta Cotton States and International Exposition, a speech that simultaneously resulted in whites showering him with the magnolia blossoms from white women’s dresses and in Du Bois sardonically referring to him as “the most distinguished Southerner since Jefferson Davis.” This speech was so central to the persona Washington was creating for himself through his autobiography that he devoted an entire chapter of *Up from Slavery* to reprinting the address in its entirety, along with reviews from the white press that call it “a revelation.” Washington describes the address as sending a sensation through the white press that had “never been equaled.” More importantly, he also reprints a telegram of congratulations that he received from President Cleveland and describes how the latter “has not only shown his friendship for me in many personal ways, but has also consented to do anything I have asked of him for our school” (133). It is because of his exhortation to his fellow African Americans to “cast down [their] bucket” that he went in the space of an hour from “that nigger on stage” to being hugged by Georgia Governor Rufus Bullock and appearing on that same stage the next year with President Cleveland. He had gone from a performing freak to a man who belonged on stages shoulder to shoulder with white leaders. He had gone from being a Negro to being an American. He had achieved what he never could have as a voice for black advancement: he had achieved access to the ears of the nation’s elite.

It is this same group of whites that *Up from Slavery* targets and that Washington wants to see him as transcending his blackness. 20 Throughout the book, Washington rarely directly addresses potential black readers while frequently engaging with his white readers. Washington does not make this direct connection with whites just in terms of content. Rather, he also does so through his choice of language and his decision to write his own words solely in Standard English, refraining from slipping into Black Vernacular even when recalling conversations that must have taken place in a regional dialect. However, whenever another African American speaks, Washington quotes them in Black Vernacular, even putting such quotations in italics more than once. Clearly, such a move distances Washington from other blacks, especially those whom he draws as having the ignorance that is central in many white stereotypes. Moreover, he even uses British spelling rules throughout the text, despite the fact that American spelling had already been standardized for over seventy years following the 1827 publication of Webster’s dictionary. Such a decision extends Washington’s gratitude that Providence led him and his people out of the “wilderness” (10) of Africa and his optimism for “the future of [his] race in this country” (10) to additional lengths. By appropriating British orthographical and grammatical conventions, repeatedly referencing British literature, and claiming that he has “always regarded Europe as [he] regarded Heaven” (160), Washington figuratively erases his African heritage and provides the illusion of having the same roots as his white readers.

Washington further constructs his identity as American rather than as black by presenting himself as an embodiment of the pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps

20 For further discussion of Washington specifically using the narrative as a means for constructing a persona that would guide how whites saw him, see Bieze; A. Bly; and Recken.
mythology perpetuated by Horatio Alger, among others. Washington repeatedly reminds readers of how far he has come since his days as a slave and of the poverty and squalor that he has pulled himself out of. However, the most significant example of him positioning himself as a latter-day Ragged Dick comes during his discussion of the three days he spent in Richmond working by day for food and sleeping under a sidewalk at night in order to make it to Hampton in time to start school there. Washington follows this description up with an anecdote of a recent reception held in his honor and attended by over 2,000 guests within eyesight of the very sidewalk he had slept under.

Washington’s claims during this scene of the joy he put into laboring for his breakfast and his linking of his lowest poverty with his eventual success clearly plays directly into the concept of the American Dream that many of his white readers would have adhered to. Further, by discussing his willingness to work, including taking on the menial and housekeeping jobs that allowed him to “dust [his] way through Hampton” (165). Washington places the onus of racial uplift on blacks themselves by suggesting that all they need to do is embrace the same work ethic that he credits with his own success. Consequently, he lets white readers off the hook by suggesting that they have no reason to blame themselves for the economic and educational hardships faced by thousands of African Americans across the South. Such a move allows Washington to further reinforce the image that he and elite whites are cut of the same cloth and have the same intrinsic values.

Washington further salves white consciences through his views on slavery. Washington displays no animosity toward slavery, never offering any examples of negative experiences and even discussing how he kept in contact for years with his former masters. Washington further suggests that his feelings are typical of former slaves, pointing out that he has known of “instances where the former masters of slaves have for years been supplied with money by their former slaves to keep them from suffering” (8). Such comments negate the horrific accounts of slavery offered in the narratives of fugitive slaves that found widespread readership in the nineteenth century. In addition to giving slavery a sunnier face than it merits, Washington also absolves legislators of taking as long as they did to abolish it, stating that once slavery had taken hold of “the social and economic life of the Republic, it was no easy matter for the country to relieve itself of the institution” (9). Washington, moreover, moves from being a mere apologist for slavery to being a supporter of it, so long as one removes racial prejudice and cruelty from the equation, thereby suggesting that slavery had no inherent connection to either of those things. According to Washington, “notwithstanding the cruel wrongs inflicted upon us, the black man got nearly as much out of slavery as the white man did” (10). In fact, Washington claims that “the ten million Negros inhabiting this country . . . are in a stronger and more hopeful position . . . than is true of an equal number of black people in any other portion of the globe” (9). When combined with his views that African Americans should spurn traditional education for trade education and manual labor, joyfully embrace being sharecroppers, laborers, and domestics, and oppose civil rights and black suffrage, Washington’s views on slavery further enhance the image that allowed him access to white leaders. He comes across not just as being sympathetic

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21 Author of the Ragged Dick series.
22 For more on Washington’s views regarding racial uplift, see Moore.
toward many whites’ views on the race question, but rather as actually sharing them himself. By providing whites with black endorsement of their racial politics, Washington gained something valuable for himself: visibility and financial support for his school in Tuskegee, which was attended only by African Americans—support that allowed him to provide as many of his fellow African Americans as possible with self-respect, economic stability, and leadership skills.

Washington takes these political views even further by extending them beyond the boundaries of race. For example, during his return home to Walden, West Virginia, after his first year at Hampton, Washington encounters a strike by the local coal miners. He then talks about how such strikes occurred frequently and always resulted in the miners returning to work for the same wages, bankrupted from spending their savings, or forced to relocate to another mine at great expense. Washington ultimately comes to the conclusion that organized labor hurts all concerned and that “the miners were worse off at the end of a strike” (40). While there is a discussion to be had concerning the enfreakment of organized labor and political agitation, what is important here is Washington’s pointed attempt to separate himself from any sort of radical politics. The end result of this move is that Washington positions himself as opposed to an additional group that the public views as outside of respectability. This move not only separates Washington from race agitators, such as Du Bois and Sutton Griggs, but also from other radicals, such as Eugene Debs and Bill Haywood. Consequently, Washington presents himself not only as ideologically white, but as the model of being so politically moderate as to appear apolitical. In other words, he masquerades as a bastion of normalcy.

While most scholars who read Up from Slavery agree that Washington comes across in the manner discussed above, I argue that not only was this persona false, but it was deliberately constructed by Washington, and that several clues in the text point to such a reading. The first piece of evidence is the photograph of Washington that serves as the frontispiece to the first edition. In the image, Washington appears in a well-tailored, conservative gray suit, complete with bow tie, with an open book resting casually upon his lap. Further, the shading of the image emphasizes the lightness of his complexion. The overall impression is one of wealth, class, and education: the sort of man who is one of society’s finest civilians. Washington comes off as much less menacing and physically imposing than Frederick Douglass, for example, in the photograph that opens the latter’s 1845 narrative. By whitening up Washington’s image, the photograph serves a similar function as the cartes de visite from sideshow exhibits discussed above, in that it presents him as “normal.” In other words, he masquerades as a bastion of normalcy.

Further, Washington suggests that his projection of himself is little more than subterfuge through his discussion of the plantation songs sung during the Antebellum Period. He specifically cites the number of songs that include yearnings for freedom. While singing these songs, slaves had to be “careful to explain that the ‘freedom’ in these songs referred to the next world, and had no connection with life in this world” (11). However, following the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment, these same slaves “threw off the mask” and explained that “freedom meant freedom of the body in this

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23 For further information on the specific racial politics that Washington endorsed and validated, see Bracey; Gates, “Trope”; Meier; and Verney.
world” (11). This reference ties in directly with other turn-of-the-century black writers, most notably Paul Laurence Dunbar in his 1896 poem “We Wear the Mask,” who reference African Americans wearing a grinning mask of accommodationism while harboring internal desires for racial and bodily freedom. This direct link, therefore, suggests that Washington is giving a similar performance.

Moreover, Washington later recollects Hampton giving him a class to teach that consisted solely of Native American students from the Indian Territory. He points out that, while they progressed academically and “were generally like any other human beings” (57), they resisted and resented having their long hair cut and the school forcing them to discontinue wearing blankets. However, Washington points out the necessity of these things in that “no white American ever thinks another race is wholly civilized until he wears the white man’s clothes, eats the white man’s food, speaks the white man’s language, and professes the white man’s religion” (57). Through his direct equation between Native Americans and “any other human beings” (57), including African Americans, Washington clearly suggests that while he presents himself according to the white definition of normalcy and citizenship, he does so resentfully and only to gain access and place himself in the position to shape policy that he eventually found himself in with Presidents Cleveland and Roosevelt. Further, he clearly outlines that he shares Du Bois’ views of double consciousness and that he too has “two warring ideals” inside him and has only publicly abandoned his black side because white America has coerced him into doing so.

It is this very mask that Washington threw off when he accepted President Roosevelt’s dinner invitation. Once he had been hosted in the most sacred and symbolic of American dining rooms, all illusions of his whiteness went out the window, as indicated by much of the initial outcry regarding the infamous dinner. For example, the Memphis Scimitar pulled no punches and referred to Washington as “a nigger who happens to have cash enough to pay the tailor and the barber, and the perfume for scents enough to take away the nigger smell” (qtd. in D. Davis 208). Such comments clearly indicate that Washington’s image of constructed whiteness had been shattered and that his visual attempt at access and intimacy instantly reduced him to the basest of black stereotypes. Further, they say that any white characteristics or ideologies that he may espouse are simply facades with no more substance than perfume and no more permanence than a haircut. Without his tailored suit, the emperor had no clothes.

The outrage at Washington’s attempt to show himself as the equal of the white man quickly spread beyond journalistic barbs and entered the realm of popular culture. One of the most popular coon songs24 of the era was one sung by Lew Dockstader entitled “Coon, Coon, Coon.” Part of the chorus went “Coon! Coon! Coon! / I wish my color would fade”; this was followed later by the lines “I wish I was a white man / ’Stead of a Coon! Coon! Coon!” However, almost immediately after his White House dinner, a satiric version entitled “Teddy’s Mistake or Booker’s Reception” overtook the original in popularity and became the standard version. Among the new lyrics were the lines “For he is a coon, coon, coon and Booker is his name.” While editors would claim that the offense of the dinner involved alienating the South by accepting an African American at a dining room that “belonged to the nation” (210), Washington’s true offense involved his

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24 For an extended discussion of coon songs, see Chapter 2.
own sense of identity. By elevating his masquerade to a degree that involved symbolic national acceptance of social equality between blacks and whites, Washington attempted to transcend the divide of double consciousness. He showed himself as simultaneously black and American. Consequently, the nation scrambled in a furious effort to remind him of his blackness and the status that went along with it.

Through this shattering of double consciousness, Washington stoked the South’s greatest social fear: the specter of miscegenation. Many editorials and cartoons alike focused their outrage not on Washington dining with the President, but rather on speculation that he had also dined with the First Lady and even sat “thigh to thigh” with Alice Roosevelt, the President’s older daughter. Despite the fact that the First Lady had declined to join the President and his guest for dinner and that Alice had been hundreds of miles away at her aunt’s farm in Farmington, Connecticut, the *Macon Telegraph* argued that “[a] dinner given one man to another in the home and privacy of his family means that the guest may woo and win the host’s daughter” (qtd. in D. Davis 212). Similarly, the *Richmond Times* argued that President Roosevelt’s invitation meant that “there is no racial reason in his opinion why whites and blacks may not marry and intermarry” (qtd. in D. Davis 213). Through these raised fears, Washington physically represented the freakishness and interspecies hybridization inherent in the term mulatto.25 Moreover, he triggered the sense of collective disability found in many Southern white men in the Post-Reconstruction South.26 Because he triggered feelings of emasculation and white vulnerability, the means by which the South could best restore itself to a sense of normalcy was through enfreaking Washington using yellow journalism, minstrel songs, and offensive cartoons.

These fears of white subordination extended beyond the bedroom as well. For example, the *Washington Post* reported on an incident that took place in Louisville, Kentucky, on the Sunday following the dinner. Allegedly, two African-American women entered a church and seated themselves in the front of the church next to a Confederate veteran and his wife. While the women themselves mentioned neither Washington nor President Roosevelt, the blame for the revolt against Jim Crow laws fell squarely on their shoulders. According to the *Post*, the dinner had “fanned the flame of Negro aspiration” (qtd. in D. Davis 213). Further, according to Deborah Davis, newspapers across the South argued that “race relations had been better than ever in the South, until Washington had spoiled everything” (215). Far from being an African American whose views made him acceptable to white Southerners, Washington now embodied the root of the fears that catalyzed the Wounded South. He had officially moved from a bastion of accommodationism to a caricature who filled the same cultural role reserved for freaks and other anomalies.

**Helen Keller: Living under the Veil**

On April 3, 1917, the eve of America’s entry into World War I, a particularly fiery anti-war speech echoed throughout New York’s Carnegie Hall. Militantly socialist in its language, the speech claimed that “[t]he few who profit from the labor of the masses

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25 Coming from the Spanish word for mule, a species derived from breeding a horse and a donkey, the term mulatto implied that half-white and half-black children were the product of interspecies breeding.

26 For an extended discussion of the collective sense of disability and threatened masculinity in the Post-Reconstruction South, see Chapter 2.
want to organize the workers into an army which will protect the interests of the capitalists” (Zinn and Arnove 284) and that “Congress is not preparing to defend the people of the United States. It is planning to protect the capital of American speculators and investors in Mexico, South America, China, and the Philippine Islands” (284). As the protest reached its climatic conclusion, it urged the audience to strike against the war and the weapons manufacturing industry, an exhortation punctuated with a plea to Americans to “[b]e not dumb, obedient slaves in an army of destruction” and to instead “[b]e heroes in an army of construction” (284). After these final words rang out, over 2,000 people surged forth in a wave of patriotism-fueled anger. The audience’s anger was so vehement and the threat of violence was so palpable that the speaker had to be protected by six New York City policemen (Herrmann 335). Neither the content of the speech alone, nor the anger toward it, makes this particular incident notable, as Communist-based rhetoric was not uncommon in Early-Twentieth-Century America. What makes it worthy of attention is that it was delivered not by Eugene Debs, Emma Goldman, or John Reed, but by America’s forgotten Communist: Helen Keller.27

In the years following the 1903 publication of her wildly popular autobiography, *The Story of My Life*, Keller found herself frequently in the public eye. When those moments involved her presenting herself as an object for consumption, knowing her place as a disabled woman, or espousing views about the disabled that matched the eugenic policies of the era, she found herself beloved and adored: a virtual superstar. However, when those views moved beyond disability and into such realms as racial, economic, and gender-based equality, or when she wanted to move beyond her accepted place by getting married, supporting radical organizations, and converting from mainstream Christianity to the tiny sect of Swedenborgianism, she became infamous and found herself criticized both by her famous friends and by the populace at large. Essentially, she could either act like “Helen Keller,” with all the trappings that went along with the mythology that surrounded her image, and find acceptance, or she could seek true citizenship and find herself treated as a cripple.

This self-constructed image of “Helen Keller” reached national attention in her autobiography, *The Story of My Life*. In it, Keller presents herself as nonthreatening to society at large, understanding of her place in American society, and a perpetual child in more than one regard, thus creating a persona similar to the one Washington creates in *Up from Slavery*. Consequently, as in Washington’s case, she presents herself in a way that allows her to transcend her bodily differences from able-bodied whites and feel as if she is part of mainstream society. However, as the incidents described above show, her societal position was borderline, temporary, merely illusory, and subject to her not stepping out above herself and behaving as if she was a full-fledged American citizen. The disconnect between these two options, between the Keller of *The Story of My Life* and the Keller who found herself the target of an angry mob, shows that much like African Americans, the disabled also found themselves living under double consciousness to the degree that she opens *The Story of My Life* by admitting her “hesitation in lifting the veil” (1). This hesitation suggests a fear that readers will be able to see beneath her own grinning mask of accommodationism and lends plausibility to her

27 For more on Helen Keller’s time spent protesting World War I, see Griffith.
autobiography being as carefully constructed as the public persona that had already led to her being called “the eighth wonder of the world” (Herrmann 63).

This image of Keller opens the narrative, as she discusses her earliest childhood days. During her description of her earliest days, she reveals that a young African-American girl and a retired hunting dog served as her “constant companions” (Story 6), thereby suggesting a willingness to classify herself as subhuman. Keller herself would have been aware of this attitude toward African Americans, based on the views of her father. Captain Arthur Keller, a former Confederate officer who believed “all things Southern to be noble,”28 did not believe that blacks were human beings (Herrmann 6). Keller makes clear in this section that she ordered the young black girl about. Throughout the early stages of the book, however, Keller frequently described herself as having been feral, animalistic, and even monstrous. Consequently, the text portrays her as the young black girl’s peer.

She enhances this connection by later describing her delight with the deformed, faceless ragdoll given to her as a present by her aunt. According to Keller, the doll contained “nothing that even the imagination of a child could convert into a face” (Story 12), thereby suggesting a complete lack of identity and providing an early touchstone for the deprecation of the disabled that marked her early public persona. Despite the doll’s gross deformity, Keller recalls that “the absence of eyes struck [her] as more than all the other defects put together” (12). The keenness with which she feels this particular lack suggests that she felt a particular kinship with the doll and viewed herself as particularly damaged due to her own lack of eyesight. Further, Keller would feel this lack even more when writing The Story of My Life, because by that time her parents had replaced her real eyes with glass ones, “for cosmetic purposes” (Herrmann 4). Her parents’ need to replace her eyes in an effort to construct a body that appeared normal only exacerbated her perception of herself as a cripple due to her lack of eyesight.

Keller’s description of her own poor behavior, lack of manners, and inability to behave in a civilized manner, traits that her family excused on account of her condition, links her acting like a feral child to her disability. Again, Keller would be consciously using this imagery to create a particular image of herself and of disabled children in general, as her own relatives viewed her “as a monster” and a “mental defective who would be better off in an institution” (Herrmann 12). Not only is this image the dominant image associated with Keller as a child, the period where she was most limited by her disability, but this period of her life makes up almost the totality of later productions of her biography, even though it makes up only roughly 15 percent of The Story of My Life. The insistence of others throughout her lifetime, including William Gibson in The Miracle Worker, on focusing on the famous scene at the water pump where Keller obtains the gift of language clearly shows that her status as the paradigm of disability rested even then on her ability to overcome her feral nature and live life as a productive member of both disabled and American society. Even Keller herself refers to this scene as the moment that she was “restored to humanity” (Story 11). Once she makes this leap, for many Americans, the climax of her narrative has been achieved.

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28 For further discussion of how being Southern helped form her identity, see Montgomery; see also Nielsen, “Southern Ties.”
However, even after she gains the ability to communicate and lift herself out of the darkness that she claims ruled her world prior to Anne Sullivan entering her life, Keller still feels a stronger connection with nature than she does with humanity. Keller describes Sullivan’s habit of “link[ing] [Keller’s] earliest thoughts with nature” and making Keller feel as if “the birds and flowers and [she] were happy peers” (17). Keller further shows herself as existing on the border between humanity and subhumanity when she describes the moment that she learned how to speak as the moment in which her “soul came out of bondage” (44). This moment provides a direct parallel to the scene in Frederick Douglass’ *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* where Douglass associates learning how to read with shedding his chains of slavery. According to Douglass, it was at this moment that “a slave became a man” (34). By associating herself with slavery, Keller consciously allows readers to associate each level of her disability as rendering her less and less human.

However, Keller most directly connects herself to freaks and others who exist outside the culture of normalcy when she reminisces about her visit to the 1893 World’s Fair in Chicago, during which she and Sullivan were accompanied by Alexander Graham Bell. During her visit, Keller enjoyed touching ancient relics, finding the only diamond discovered in the Cape of Good Hope exhibit during the entire run of the fair, and “learning about the progress of man” (*Story* 57). Further, she credits this visit with sparking her appreciation of “the real and the earnest in the workaday world” (57). However, her favorite portion of her visit came when she visited the sideshows, which she did each night of her visit to the fair. Having obtained permission to touch each of the exhibits, she took in a world “crammed full of novelty and interest” (56). This memory echoes with another of her favorite memories in which Sullivan took her to the circus and arranged for her to spend time bonding with animals, including the chance to shake hands with the performing bear. The affinity Keller feels for the ethnicities and oddities of the sideshows clearly shows the readers that she knows her place and not only willingly, but happily, places herself in their company and social space. Just as Washington would three years later urge African Americans to do, Keller is clearly willing to cast down her bucket.

Keller indicates a willingness to cement herself in a culturally accepted space when she shares her interests now that she has entered college at Harvard. Her love of learning is clear; however, she limits that learning to realms deemed acceptable for women and other marginalized members of society, such as nature and the theater. Literature, which she describes as “my Utopia” (89) makes up Keller’s greatest joy, since it is the one place where she is “not disenfranchised” (89). Each of these areas, especially literature, were acceptable interests for women of this era because they kept them engrossed while keeping them out of the more masculine (i.e., serious) worlds of business, mathematics, and science. Thus, even when Keller describes learning as a Phoenix out of which civilization grows, her own metamorphosis is only from disability to respectable white womanhood, a transition that still leaves her as an outsider.

More importantly, even Keller herself describes herself as a “bull in a china shop” every time she enters “the kingdom of [her] mind” (76). According to Keller, tiny bits of

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29 In Late-Nineteenth-Century America, circus freaks and anthropomorphized animals would have existed on a similar plateau, almost human but not quite there.
knowledge and fragments of ideas attack her like “hailstones” and pursue her like “goblins” until she wants nothing more than to “smash the idols [she] came to worship” (76). Here, she shows how despite her love of learning, she himself does not fully believe that she belongs in the world of ideas and “college-nixies” and is better off destroying any attempt on her part to formulate ideas that help her understand the world as it exists outside of her own darkened space. As a result, she indicates that she understands that she should limit her intellect and restrict using her voice to raising awareness for the disabled and issues that solely concern disability. Whether she wanted it to be or not, disability became Keller’s “vocation” (Herrmann 401). Thus, Keller has used her autobiography as subterfuge, designed to convince her readers that she has placed herself on the right side of the double-consciousness divide. Helen Keller, however, was not the first “Helen Keller.”

The persona Keller constructed for herself and that others held her to had precedent prior to the publication of The Story of My Life in the form of the life story of and public admiration for Laura Bridgman. Born on December 21, 1829, in Hanover, New Hampshire, Laura became deaf and blind at age two as a result of complications from a case of scarlet fever. Afraid their daughter was turning into a “wild child,” Bridgman’s parents took her to Fisher’s School for the Blind in 1836, where she came under the care of its director, Dr. Samuel Gridley Howe. Howe began Bridgman’s education by giving her objects, such as a spoon, with the object’s name on it in raised letters. Eventually, she learned to connect the letters to the object and developed the ability to ask for things using the corresponding sign for each object. Shortly thereafter, he taught her the manual finger alphabet for the blind, the same alphabet that Anne Sullivan would ultimately use to communicate with Helen Keller. Once she had learned that alphabet, Bridgman quickly developed a sizeable vocabulary of nouns, verbs, and adjectives (Herrmann 15-17).

By the time Bridgman turned 13, both she and Howe had become internationally famous and had begun traveling the world, garnering thousands upon thousands of admirers. On these tours, Howe would display Bridgman demonstrating her communication abilities as well as manual domestic skills, such as threading a needle, the trick she would become most famous for. While presented in a more educational format, Bridgman’s exhibitions quickly became dressed-up sideshows, similar in tone to the displays of Joseph Merrick before London’s Royal Medical Society.30 Bridgman’s admirers included psychologist G. Stanley Hall, philosopher Francis Lieber, and Charles Darwin. Moreover, she attracted the attention of phrenologists and occultists, most notably George Combe, many of whom viewed her as a supernatural oddity and miracle. Bridgman’s strongest admirer, however, was Charles Dickens, who met her at the famed Perkins School for the Blind during his first visit to the United States. Consequently, she became a “living laboratory for research into the existence of innate ideas” (Herrmann 19), while also being “mythologized as a redemptive angel . . . whose rescue from spiritual darkness by Howe movingly reenacted the Christian drama” (Gitter 186). As long as she remained in her accepted role of medical curiosity and allowed others to

30 Most famously known as the Elephant Man, Merrick was displayed naked many times to members of the Royal Medical Society under the guise of scientific interest. The tone of these sessions, however, suggests that they primarily satisfied more prurient interests.
define her status of spiritual vessel, Bridgman remained popular and was allowed to
transcend the lines of double consciousness and mingle among society.

However, when she broke free of these restrictions, she found herself scorned and
cast out by those who had the most at stake in her creation. These problems manifested
themselves through her quest to express herself orally. Unlike Keller, Bridgman never
gained the ability to speak recognizable words. Instead, she ultimately learned to
communicate verbally through roughly sixty different monosyllabic sounds, most of
which sounded like various grunts. By the time she had turned sixteen, Bridgman had
become so enthusiastically garrulous that Howe felt she was endangering her socially
constructed image by shattering the peaceful and feminine mystique that had led to
spectators gazing upon her in a quest for spiritual enlightenment. Exasperated at the
threat she now posed to both of their reputations, Howe ultimately told her that if she
wished to continue her grunting, “she should go into a closet and close the door; then she
could be as ‘repulsive’ and ‘uncouth’ as she pleased” (Herrmann 21). Bridgman’s choice
became clear: either she could fit society’s definition of what it meant to be disabled or
she could live shut away from society. By the 1880s, Bridgman had become an icon in
the deaf and blind communities, when Helen Keller’s mother, Kate Keller, read
Bridgman’s story and started to hope that a similar change could be effected on her own
daughter. Consequently, there is little doubt that by the time Helen Keller composed her
autobiography in 1901, she had become well aware of Bridgman’s story and had learned
a valuable lesson from it: either she could be what people wanted her to be or she could
spend her life in isolation.

Keller found herself linked with Bridgman right from the beginning of her
burgeoning fame as “the miracle” that had been wrought by Alexander Graham Bell and
Michael Anagnos, director of the Perkins Institution, which Keller attended once her
work with Sullivan had run its course. In his 1888 annual report for the Perkins
Institution, entitled “Helen Keller: A Second Laura Bridgman,” Anagnos created what
would become the legend of Helen Keller. In his report, Anagnos claimed that in such
areas as “intellectual alertness, keenness of observation, and vivacity of temperament,”
Keller was “unquestionably the equal of Laura Bridgman,” while in such traits as
“sweetness of disposition she clearly [excelled compared with] her prototype” (qtd. in
Nielsen, Radical Lives 10-14). Further, almost from the beginning of her exhibition,
Keller found herself credited with superpowers, including telepathy and the ability to
communicate directly with God, claims substantiated by Bell. Consequently, the public
clamored for access to Keller to the extent that it became a social coup for the wealthy to
display her at their most fashionable parties. Needing a new disabled mystic now that
Bridgman had aged into her sixties, the public turned to Keller to fill the same role that
had been constructed for Bridgman nearly fifty years earlier.

Unfortunately, Keller also learned the penalty of shattering her public image at an
early age. In 1891, Keller sent Anagnos a story entitled “The Frost King” that she had
written for him as a birthday gift. Delighted with the story, Anagnos had it reprinted in
the Perkins Institution’s house newspaper, the Goodson Gazette, whose editor proclaimed
it the “greatest story in the history of literature” (qtd. in Herrmann 79-80). Shortly
thereafter, the school learned that Keller’s story bore a strong similarity to “The Frost
Fairies,” a story published by Margaret T. Canby as part of a children’s anthology in
1873. An embarrassed and angered Anagnos publicly distanced himself from Keller,
even going to so far as to proclaim that “Helen Keller is a living lie” while also charging that Sullivan “had taught her to deceive” (qtd. in Herrmann 84). In this case, the “Helen Keller” to whom Anagnos refers is not the living, breathing person; rather, he is referring to the disabled prodigy whose intellectual and moral perfection had been exhibited to the whole world. According to Dorothy Herrmann, this traumatic experience was the school’s “way of punishment for failing to live up to the image that they [had] created for [Keller] of a handicapped genius” (83). Anagnos’ bitterness came from the idea that outside of her constructed image, Keller herself had no value. She had her choice: she could play the prodigy or she could go back to be a blind and deaf farm girl.

Even years after the incident had been forgotten by most, Anagnos remained bitter and aloof from Keller. Moreover, Keller found herself brought before an inquisition of nine school administrators who examined her for hours on charges of plagiarism, an experience that Keller recalls in *The Story of My Life* as leaving her exhausted, weeping in her bed, and wishing to die. The school ultimately exonerated her, deciding that the story was simply the result of a child innocently amalgamating her ideas with those of a story that had probably been read to her years before. However, the incident taught Keller a lesson that she would carry with her for life and that surely influenced the way she presented herself to her readers in *The Story of My Life*: live up to your public persona or pay the price by living in obscurity.

This incident ultimately prepared Keller for the onslaught of skeptics who refused to believe that she had written *The Story of My Life* herself. While the bulk of readers admired Keller’s autobiography, there was a chorus of doubters who believed that Sullivan was the book’s real author. The basis for these suspicions came from Keller writing about things that went outside the realm of what people assumed it meant to be deaf and blind. For example, one anonymous review in the weekly magazine *The Nation* argued that all of Keller’s knowledge “is hearsay knowledge, her very sensations are, for the most part, vicarious and yet she writes of things beyond her power of perception with the assurance of one who has verified every word” (qtd. in Herrmann 136). This sort of criticism and public skepticism about *The Story of My Life* ultimately grew to such a degree that Keller published *The World I Live In* (1908) as a means of addressing it. In short, if Keller professed knowledge of things that went beyond the accepted boundaries of what blind and deaf people were “supposed” to know or even “could possibly” know, then she was considered to be making it up or fraudulently taking credit for someone else’s work. Thus, not only was Keller limited to writing and talking about her disability, but she was also limited to discussing specific aspects that met the able-bodied populace’s definition of what it meant to be deaf and blind.

When Keller stuck to this constructed image of acceptance of her space, she found her public opinions received with love and acceptance. The primary example of this phenomenon comes from her views of the role that the disabled should play in society. Rather than fight for equality or for the integration of the disabled into mainstream society, Keller argued extensively in favor of a different solution to the rampant discrimination against the disabled, particularly in the workplace. Keller’s proposed

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31 For further discussion of those who doubted that Keller had written *The Story of My Life*, see Kleege; see also Lash.
32 In *The World I Live In*, Keller extensively discusses how she is able to experience such sensations as light, color, and sound in her own way.
solution was to segregate the disabled into what she called “sheltering workshops” and to limit occupations for the disabled to the trade and domestic spheres. Keller, however, remained adamant that the disabled should be required to work. In fact, in 1824, the New York Times printed a letter to the editor from Keller that characterized disabled adults as “a public or private burden, a bad debt, an object of pitying charity, and an economic loss” (qtd. in Nielsen, Radical Lives 28). In fact, at no point in her lengthy public-speaking career did Keller speak out for the right of disabled people to full and equal citizenship, instead choosing to publicly spout opinions about the disabled that mirrored Washington’s views on black citizenship a generation previously. As long as she put on her Booker T. Washington mask and hid under the veil of double consciousness, Keller’s position in the limelight was secure.

Keller also argued for national control of disabled people to a degree that stretched well beyond the furthest horizons of Washington’s accommodationism and her own pro-segregation politics. Not only did Keller openly espouse her enthusiastic approval for eugenics, but she also went so far as to advocate the adoption of laws that would permit the abortion and even the euthanasia of disabled children. This push to eliminate weakened and defective bodies clearly shapes how she constructs herself in The Story of My Life. Rather than discuss her limitations, Keller instead focuses her discussion on the ways in which she has overcome her disability. Further, never once does she bemoan her fate, describe the ways her condition inconveniences her, or express any sort of rage or regret at her blindness or her deafness. Clearly, when Keller speaks of eugenics, she does not mean that its principles should be applied to herself; rather, she is referring to those who do not possess the ability to become “Helen Keller” themselves.

The most public and extraordinary example of Keller expressing her belief in euthanasia came as she publicly discussed the euthanasia of Baby Bollinger, an event that would become a touchstone in the eugenics movement. On November 12, 1915, Anna Bollinger gave birth in Chicago to a baby boy who suffered from a number of physical deformities. According to medical reports, the baby had no neck, only one ear, a misshapen chest and shoulders, and severe internal abnormalities that threatened his life. Upon being brought in to consult, surgeon Harry Haiselden recommended that the parents not consent to surgery that could have saved the baby’s life, a suggestion that the parents complied with. Five days later, Baby Bollinger died (Pernick 3-5). One week after the parents refused surgery on Baby Bollinger, Haiselden published an editorial in the New York Times and the Washington Post in which he defended his position. Haiselden argued that the baby had been a “monster” and that people with disabilities presented both a burden to and a danger against society, going so far as to argue that “it is our duty to protect ourselves and future generations against the defective” (22). Moreover, Haiselden claimed that he had been performing euthanasia on deformed or defective children for at least a decade and openly proclaimed his intention to continue doing so, a promise he kept by euthanizing five more children over the next three years (Pernick 4).

While the case of the Bollinger Baby became a flashpoint of conversation across the United States, Keller did not weigh in on the issue until almost a month later. In a letter published in the December 18, 1915 issue of The New Republic entitled “Physicians’ Juries for Defective Babies,” Keller publicly affirmed her support for Dr. Haiselden and all other like-minded physicians. Keller expressed her disagreement with
the contemporary practice of physicians “savin[ing] imbeciles at birth,” arguing that doing so only “adds to the crime wave of the city’s future” (173). According to Keller, “[a] mental defective is almost sure to be a potential criminal” (173). She then proposed the creation of juries of physicians who would determine if a defective baby would live or die, arguing that “[s]ociety must choose between a fine humanity like Dr. Haiselden’s and a cowardly sentimentalism” (174). Keller’s views that disabled infants presented an “intolerable burden for families and society” and a guaranteed danger to public safety “aligned closely with those of the Progressive Eugenics Movement” (Gerdtz 496). Further, according to Kim Nielsen, Keller also published a continuum that ranked disabilities from acceptable to unacceptable, with deafness and blindness in the acceptable range (Radical Lives 37). Moreover, Keller refrained from publicly presenting herself as having ever been viewed as helpless and beyond redemption, including in her presentation of her earliest years in The Story of My Life, suggesting her desire to shed the disabled half of double consciousness in her public identity.

Throughout her career as a public speaker, Keller was most effective when she presented herself as a spectacle to be consumed by the masses, a practice that began with the publication of The Story of My Life. Throughout the early years of her public exhibitions, particularly in the months following her autobiography’s publication, her public addresses became “attractions” that included “women staring at her through opera glasses and lorgnettes” (Nielsen, Radical Lives 22), as if she were some kind of specimen or source of entertainment. Moreover, Keller would turn herself and her story into a piece of entertainment on two different occasions.

The first instance came in 1919 when she starred as herself in Deliverance,33 a film about her life and ability to overcome her disability. The film wove back and forth between true moments in Keller’s life and fantasy sequences that only served to strengthen her mythological status. The film’s more absurd scenes include Keller being romantically wooed by Ulysses on Circe’s island, Keller appearing bearing a torch of hope before a mass of the afflicted in the guise of what the film calls “The Mother of Sorrows,” and the film’s conclusion, in which she rides a white charger and blows a horn as a latter-day Joan of Arc leading the people of the world to freedom. Further, the film’s intertitles regularly dubbed her “The most wonderful girl in the world” and the “MIRACLE OF MIRACLES” (Herrmann 213-14). The second instance came during the 1920–1924 period, during which she and Sullivan starred in a vaudeville act entitled “The Star of Happiness”, alongside such other attractions as Dr. W. B. Thompson, who claimed that a person could cure his own illnesses by touching his fingertips together, and “The Human Tank,” who simultaneously thrilled and revolted audiences by swallowing live frogs and then vomiting them back up still alive. Keller and Sullivan’s act began with Sullivan introducing a smiling Keller as “The Star of Happiness”; Keller then demonstrated her ability to feel applause and music. Throughout the bulk of the act, Keller stood smiling at the audience as Sullivan told the story of how she taught Keller as a child, with Keller occasionally interjecting to point out how she had overcome her disability or how she had been blessed by God, all leading up to Keller finding a bouquet of roses that was across the stage using only her sense of smell. As a backstage chorus

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33 Only a few scenes from this film survive. Descriptions included here are taken from contemporary viewings.
sang the act’s schmaltzy title song, the curtain dropped. However, the act was not over: Keller came out to answer questions from the audience. While some of the questions were genuine, planted questions designed to get a laugh were also used. For example, Keller would often be asked if she closed her eyes to sleep, to which she dutifully quipped, “I guess I do, but I’ve never stayed awake to see” (Herrmann 221-7). Clearly, despite Keller’s claims that it was tasteful and dignified, “The Star of Happiness” continued the process of exploiting her as a walking stereotype, a source of amusement, and one of the wonders of the world. Her stage may have been a bit fancier, but at the end of the day, she allowed herself to be used as a sideshow marvel and as a culturally constructed freak. From the publication of The Story of My Life through the mid-1920s, Keller willingly clung to her persona as a spectacle for the masses and a vessel of hope, optimism, and eternal mysticism. As long as she played the role of a female Tiny Tim, she had a place in society as one of the “good cripples.”

However, each time she stepped outside the boundaries permitted to her, she found herself at least temporarily demoted to the same status that all other disabled citizens were trapped in. These boundaries were most commonly drawn by public figures and average citizens alike who “questioned her capacity to participate in the public realm. They interpreted her disability . . . as rendering her unfit for a wide ranging political life” (Nielsen, Radical Lives 9). Consequently, Keller found her public role determined by those who defined what her disability meant and faced opposition every time she tried to present herself as something more than a spokesperson for society’s own views of the disabled. Keller’s most controversial stances include her vocal fight for racial and gender equality and for the rights of labor. Keller’s fight against Jim Crow included membership in the NAACP as well as a friendly correspondence with W. E. B. Dubois. Keller saw “the outrages against the colored people as a denial of Christ” (Letter 305), as she wrote in a letter to Du Bois that he later printed in the April 1916 issue of The Crisis. Similarly, as a member of the International Workers of the Word and a public sympathizer with the Communist Party, Keller vociferously fought for human rights in a multitude of ways, including joining picket lines; publicly befriending noted labor leaders, including Bill Haywood and John Macy; and honoring picket lines to the degree that she refused to attend the premiere of Deliverance to show solidarity with an ongoing actors’ strike. A July 8, 1916 New York Times article covering a strike at the mills in Wrentham, Massachusetts, expressed Keller’s kinship with the downtrodden. The piece quotes Keller as stating that if the mill hands “are denied a living wage, I am also denied. While they are industrial slaves, I cannot be free” (qtd. in Foner 84).

The question clearly becomes how to explain the distinct disconnect between Keller’s fight against racial and economic discrimination and her public approval of segregation of the disabled. Given that her comments show how strongly connected she felt to the striking mill hands, as well as the fervor with which she spoke out in favor of birth control, sexual freedom, and women’s rights, simply arguing that she was too close to disabled rights does not suffice. Instead, I argue that, like Washington, Keller put up a front of sharing mainstream political views to gain the access necessary to support causes that would surreptitiously benefit people at the lower end of the social ladder. Once

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34 For examples of Keller’s disability serving as grotesque amusement until well into the twentieth century, see Barrick.
Washington had gained the President’s ear, his sole focus was garnering additional financial support for Tuskegee. Similarly, Keller used her status as a novelty and an attraction to speak out in favor of communism and to fight for the rights of the poor, the economic class inhabited by a large portion of the disabled. However, the angry response to Keller’s forays into socialist politics, including Sullivan’s calling her an embarrassment, suggests that Keller’s attempts to be both the living definition of disability and a strong political voice resulted only in her being punished for her attempts to bridge the double-consciousness divide.

Consequently, Keller consistently found her interests in and attempts to write about things other than disability squelched by friends, publishers, and the public. The controversial nature of many of her beliefs clearly played a role in people’s decision to limit her in this way. However, that decision also reflected the desire of her closest associates and the American public at large to keep her as a perpetual child, one of the most enduring of disability-based stereotypes. Although she wrote twelve books over the course of her life, only *The Story of My Life* and *The World I Live In*, the two that deal solely with disability, achieved any sort of financial success. By contrast, critics panned *Out of the Dark*, her 1913 collection of essays espousing communism and social uplift, questioning her ability to develop valid social beliefs on her own. Similarly, Keller regularly found proposals and manuscripts for books on topics other than disability, most notably those reflecting her desire to write books on sexuality and women’s rights, swiftly rejected by publishers. These rejections did not stem from the quality of the writing or the salability of the topic in general; rather, they addressed her proposed books as being on subjects that were unfit for her to write about due to her disability and stated that the publishing house did not believe that Americans had any interest in reading her views on anything else.35

Further, even those closest to Keller discouraged her from behaving and living like a full-fledged woman; most notably, Sullivan and Keller’s mother squashed Keller’s acceptance of a marriage proposal from Peter Fegan, a longtime friend and, according to Keller’s private journal entries, the only true romantic love of her life. Excited at the possibility of becoming both a wife and a mother, Keller went with Fegan to Boston to obtain a marriage license. Unfortunately, upon reading about their engagement in the newspaper, Keller’s mother forcefully forbade the wedding and expressed disdain at Keller’s desire to be married, horror at the idea of her having a child, and disgust at Keller exhibiting sexual desire for Fegan.36 After two thwarted attempts at elopement, the second of which resulted in Fegan finding himself turned away at gunpoint, the relationship fizzled. While friends have discussed Keller’s bitterness toward her mother, she publicly blamed herself for having been “foolish enough to fall in love” (Herrmann 198), thereby placing the veil of double consciousness over her eyes once again.

The connection between this infantilization and response to her Communist views is shown in a 1913 letter from Andrew Carnegie asking Keller if it was true that she had become a socialist. In it, the noted steel magnate threatened to lay the then thirty-three-year-old woman across his lap and spank her until she came to her senses (Nielsen, 35 For further discussion of Keller’s writing being accepted only when she wrote about her own disability, see Werner. 36 Under early-twentieth-century law, Keller’s disability rendered her a permanent dependent and left her powerless against her mother’s objections.)
Beyond 33). By stripping away the opportunity for Keller to speak her mind, to protest her government, and even to marry the man of her choice, Keller’s handlers, friends, and public admirers made clear that because she was disabled, any chances at citizenship or normalcy would be patently denied. This irrational need to preserve their vision of Keller as the childlike mystic and disability icon found in The Story of My Life turned ugly in the crowd’s violent response to her speech against World War I discussed at the beginning of this section. The crowd gathered at Carnegie Hall surely felt some sense of betrayal at hearing someone whose persona so closely matched their own politics speak out so vehemently against the war effort and even against the United States itself. The need for police protection clearly indicates that the crowd in question showed evidence of ugly intentions. Just like the “good negro” who got caught associating on equal terms with whites, Keller transformed in their eyes from one of the “good cripples” into a freak. Keller revealed herself to them as a fraud and a threat, thereby triggering a response rivaling that of a Southern lynch mob. In a 1913 letter, John Macy described Keller as deserving to be treated as a peer and an equal, claiming that she had “earned the right to go to jail” (Nielsen, Beyond 25). However, even four years later, a frenzied mob of New Yorkers showed that the rest of the country still did not agree with him.

Like the thousands of African Americans who regularly endured the pain and risks of straightening their hair and lightening their skin, both Booker T. Washington and Helen Keller proved their willingness to engage in self-degradation by appearing more white/normal than their bodies had made them. This decision allowed them the chance to have a foothold both in the black/disabled world and in American society at the same time. They found themselves allowed to choose which portion of their identity they were going to embrace at any given moment, so long as they remained in disguise. The outrage at the lifting of their veils and the removal of their masks definitively shows their enfreakment and re-marginalization. Their ability to disguise themselves as normal demonstrated the precariousness of the line between freakishness and normalcy, thereby forcing white, Southern, and American cultures to see their own potential to become enfreaked themselves. By confirming and then challenging society’s definitions of what it means to be black or disabled, both Washington and Keller showed that double consciousness represented the schism between being a freak and being an American and that despite society’s prohibitions, it was possible to at least briefly span both sides, so long as one left his or her mask on and refrained from lifting the veil.
Chapter 4 “Unsightly Objects”: Social Class, Disability, and William Dean Howells

Toward the end of William Dean Howells’ novel *A Modern Instance* (1882), Ben Halleck, the crippled son of a socialite family and the novel’s moral center, expresses his wish to move to Uruguay. Halleck’s wish to leave New York for the remoteness of South America comes from his desire to leave “civilization,” a feeling that comes from his belief that he does not belong in his parents’ circle. Halleck proclaims that he wants to “get away because [he’s] a miserable fraud here” (353) and that he does not belong mingling with New York’s social elite. In contrast, Marcia Hubbard, wife of newspaperman Bartley Hubbard, expresses to the Hallecks early in the novel that she wants her newborn daughter Flavia to join the Hallecks’ church. Marcia does not believe in the Bible and holds no allegiance to any particular Christian creed; rather, her desire for Flavia to be christened and baptized into the Hallecks’ church comes from her desire for Flavia to eventually join the Hallecks’ social circle. Marcia wants Flavia to “belong to the church where the best people go” (252), admitting to Mrs. Halleck, “I can’t tell if it’s the true church or not, but I shall be satisfied, if it’s made you what you are” (252). While Mrs. Halleck feigns graciousness to Marcia, she finds Marcia and Bartley “ruinously open-minded” and far too crude and common for Flavia to ever truly belong in Society.1 Therefore, Ben’s self-rejection and Mrs. Halleck’s automatic dismissal of Flavia show how lacking the proper pedigree and being disabled are equally fatal to those seeking a place in Society, marking them as automatically unfit. In *The Story of My Life*, Helen Keller amplifies this kinship between class and disability by expressing her outrage at segregated housing for the poor, sympathizing with them being “all gnarled and bent out of shape” (94). Howells underscores this connection in the novel’s conclusion by having Halleck return from Uruguay significantly altered in his physical appearance, so much so that his closest friend, Atherton, scarcely recognizes him.

This obsession with both coming from and producing acceptable stock taps into the eugenics movement that was taking hold in 1880s America. Ultimately defined by Charles Davenport in *Heredity in Relation to Eugenics* (1911) as “the science of the improvement of the human race by better breeding” (1), eugenics was already crafting American normalcy and segregating it from what had already been termed “the unfit” (Smith 13). For example, in his 1883 “Memoir,” Alexander Graham Bell posited that deaf people should not marry or procreate. Further, a 1904 list of all members of the unfit places “the pauper class” and “the deformed” as equally unfit (Black 58). Consequently, such seemingly distinct late-nineteenth-century policies as Jim Crow laws, unsightly beggar ordinances,2 and laws prohibiting marriage for epileptics and imbeciles all coalesce as examples of America’s fetish with creating physical fitness and social homogeneity. Howells shows this obsession with proper breeding when, upon meeting Marcia for the first time, Mrs. Halleck takes great care to inform her that Ben was not born crippled and that he was lamed in a late childhood accident. Mrs. Halleck then confesses that she “can’t bear to have anyone think he was always lame” (*Modern* 250). She further reveals this need for others to remember his good breeding by calling him

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1 When referring to the members of a city’s elite, the term “Society” is capitalized throughout this chapter. All other uses of the word are lowercase.

2 The official term for what came to be known as Ugly Laws.
“child” throughout the novel. While this appellation certainly infantilizes him, it also leaves him perpetually in the phase of his life that occurred before his accident.

Additionally, Society’s need to separate itself from all others, particularly the unfit, reveals itself through the terror that hybridization, often termed “mongrelization,” struck in the collective hearts of the upper classes. Studies of these attitudes typically focus either on legislation prohibiting the congenitally disabled from marrying, such as Virginia’s forced sterilization law, which was upheld in *Buck v. Bell*, or on the fears of miscegenation, such as those expressed in Madison Grant’s *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916) and other works of its ilk. Davenport summarized these anxieties in a 1916 article in which he described hybridized people as “a badly put together people and a dissatisfied, restless, ineffective people” (qtd. in Smith 15). This desire to preserve racial and genetic purity resulted in Jim Crow laws, literacy tests for immigrants, and IQ tests as a means of controlling breeding. However, it also manifested itself in the rash of baby beauty contests and advertisements featuring cherubic white infants that ran throughout the era (Snyder and Mitchell 30). Howells demonstrates this worship of pure and proper breeding through Halleck’s refusal to marry anyone, especially a Society girl, out of sheer duty to his class. When Ben announces his intention to move to Uruguay, his sister Olive insists that he must be running away from a girl who has broken his heart and presses him for her name. Halleck replies, “If you think I’ve been fool enough to offer myself to someone, you’re very much mistaken” (*Modern* 353). Further, Halleck refers to himself throughout the novel as an “abject dog” and claims that being crippled makes him a “useless creature.” Halleck’s self-loathing shows as he limps away from standing outside Marcia Hubbard’s window, even though he has desired her since adolescence, when his game foot starts to throb. Halleck’s clear association between his self-denial of his romantic dreams and his disability provides an example of the central role that proper breeding plays in Howells’ fiction.

An examination of the so-called “Ugly Laws” that sprang up across America and an analysis of Howells’ most famous novel, *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885) demonstrate the connection between disability and social class in Late-Nineteenth-Century America. These explorations culminate in an investigation of Howells’ novels’ presentation of social class as a stigma and the ways his fiction shows that it was as much a sort of ugliness in this period as physical deformity. By exploring Late-Nineteenth-Century American culture’s elitist nature and its infatuation with breeding, this chapter will present *The Rise of Silas Lapham* as commentary on the period’s growing eugenics movement and culture of enfreakment.

**Civic Bodies: Nationalism, Stigmatization, and the City on the Hill**

Central to the late-nineteenth-century preoccupation with lineage and physicality is the concept of “The City on the Hill.” Referring to Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, the concept of the City on the Hill comes from John Winthrop’s sermon “A Model of Christian Charity,” given on board the *Arbella* as it headed for the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630. Claiming that Boston would become a shining city on a hill, Winthrop’s sermon has traditionally been seen as giving birth both to the notion that the United States is

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3 Found in Matthew 5-7.
God’s country and to the concept of American exceptionalism. More importantly for our purposes, however, Winthrop’s sermon is also the root of “the genealogy of ‘the American’ as a distinctive national-cultural identity” (Bercovitch 84). By establishing the quintessential American as an Anglo-Saxon, able-bodied landowner, the sermon implicitly marked everyone else as inherently un-American blights that must be expunged. Consequently, it laid the groundwork for “a process of violence . . . sustained into the 20th Century by a rhetoric of holy war against everything un-American” (8). While most commonly associated among Americanists with colonial New England and the Jim Crow South, the notion of the City on the Hill also shaped the political and social cultures of Northern cities during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Shaping civic life and High Society alike, the idea of the City on the Hill fueled both a burgeoning sense of nationalism and a strong tendency to stigmatize the physically aberrant during this era.

Benedict Anderson’s definition of nationalism highlights this focus on the body in forming communities. Anderson defines nationalism as “the pathology of modern developmental history, as inescapable as neurosis in the individual” (5), language that clearly applies to the late nineteenth century’s correlation between masculinity and neurological health. Further, Anderson argues, “nationalism invents nations where they do not exist” (6). As we will see later in this chapter, Turn-of-the-Century America forged nations within its borders that ran along bodily, economic, and genealogical lines. Anderson’s definition of a nation as “an imagined political community . . . imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (6) is reflected in the way large Northern cities fragmented themselves into many segments to the degree that they became a privileged core surrounded by a series of ghettos. Ultimately, America’s urban centers looked remarkably similar to the layout of the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair, with the Midway’s exhibits circumscribing the White City.

Dedicated in 1921, the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia exemplifies the frequently drawn connection between being able-bodied and being an American found in Turn-of-the-Century America. Instead of containing a physical body, the tomb represents the traits and physiognomy of an “average” soldier and, by extension, a “normal” American. Exemplifying Sacvan Bercovitch’s view of America as “a process of symbol making” that ultimately defines “the American Way” (12), the tomb reinforces the idea of able-bodied whiteness as American while excluding all other body types, thereby conforming to Anderson’s definition of racism as “the erasing of nationality or permanent assignment of a different nationality” (148). These same supposedly un-American bodies, therefore, found themselves excluded from civic life during this period.

This connection between race- and disability-based discrimination is further solidified in Erving Goffman’s definition of stigmatization. According to Goffman, the Greeks originated the term stigma “to refer to bodily signs designed to expose something unusual and bad about the moral character of the signifier” (1), while the Christians added a layer of metaphor through which it “referred to bodily signs of physical disorder” (1). Stigma then “constitutes a discrepancy between virtual and actual social identity” (3).

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4 For further discussion of American exceptionalism, see Hietala; Hodgson; Lockhart; Madsen; Miller; and Murray.
Stigmatization, therefore, is “the process by which a single trait outweighs all others in a person’s makeup, barring him or her from a social circle where he or she would otherwise be received. The stigmatized thus become somehow not quite human” (5). This notion is reflected by such terms as “cripple” or even “common,” as well as more overtly racist terms such as “slant-eyed” and “hook-nosed.” In each of these cases, the person’s identity, completely reduced to physical or genealogical traits, becomes his or her imperfection, which turns him or her into an imposter, a fake American and a pseudo-citizen. Unlike the Southern City on the Hill of the late nineteenth century or even the Puritan-based one of the seventeenth century, the late-nineteenth-century Northern City on the Hill was not grounded on a closed set of Protestant beliefs. Rather, it was rooted in such superficialities as able-bodiedness and lineage. Prime examples of this mentality can be found in exploring the unsightly beggar ordinances that sprung up across the North during this period as well as the fiction of William Dean Howells.

**Improper Persons: Ugly Laws and Urban Landscaping**

On May 19, 1881, the *Chicago Tribune* announced that Alderman Peevey would later that week introduce a new ordinance to the Chicago City Council. Peevey’s ordinance, which would pass and give Chicago its version of what would come to be colloquially known as an Ugly Law, stated that:

> Any person who is diseased, maimed, mutilated, or in any way deformed so as to be an unsightly or disgusting object, or an improper person to be allowed in or on the streets, highways, or public places of this city, shall not therein or thereon expose himself to public view. (Schweik 293)

While the first law of this kind had been passed fourteen years earlier in San Francisco, the Chicago law ushered in a rash of similar laws across the United States over the next decade. These laws would show up in Western cities, such as Denver; in Midwestern hubs, such as Columbus; and in Eastern metropolises, such as New York. The last of these laws was passed by Reno in 1905, but Chicago made its law even more stringent in 1911, and Los Angeles attempted to pass an Ugly Law as late as 1913. Though some of these laws are still technically on the books, most of them were repealed in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

These laws are noteworthy as well for their harsh and dehumanizing language. The Chicago law, for example, used “diseased,” “maimed,” “mutilated,” and “deformed” to suggest the prohibition on ugliness and to exclude the disabled from any public space outside of the freak show, the almshouse, or, eventually, the asylum. In fact, nearly all of the Ugly Laws listed imprisonment in the almshouse or asylum as a punishment option. The Chicago law’s sweeping language indicates a desire to purge the city of anyone who blighted the urban landscape. While such ordinances were usually referred to officially as “unsightly beggar ordinances,” most of these laws made no specific mention of begging and instead barred any appearance in public, whether as a panhandler, as a consumer, or as a participant in civic affairs. The terms “mutilated” and “deformed,” moreover, marked the disabled person not as broken and burdensome, but as a defective second-class citizen. Therefore, these laws provide one of multiple ways that the 1880s witnessed the yoking of disability not just to race, but also to other features of the undesirable classes.
Phrases such as “disgusting object” and “improper person,” furthermore, illustrate the law’s attempts not only to limit citizenship to those whose bodies met certain qualifications, but also to further reduce those who did not to rubbish. Such dehumanization renders them an eyesore to be disposed of as expeditiously as possible, nothing more and nothing less. The Ugly Laws provided communities with a way to reconfigure themselves that allowed them to be rid of aberrant bodies forever. By attempting to restore cities’ appearance of potency and normalcy, these laws paved the way for re-urbanization and tapped into the eugenic attitudes that were inculcated into Late-Nineteenth-Century America. These eugenic attitudes found legal sanction in the form of the Supreme Court upholding both Jim Crow laws and forced sterilization laws as constitutional. In addition, Congress passed laws, such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882,\(^5\) that also fostered eugenic beliefs. These attitudes resonated with a host of vigilante groups who enjoyed a great deal of political cache. These groups charged themselves with upholding public morality and guarding society from the Other. These groups also enjoyed a great deal of currency with the public, thereby showing just how popular laws that prohibited the exposure of disabled bodies were.

While an 1887 editorial may have forcefully averred that “the nation is not a dime museum” (qtd. in Schweik 101), indeed, at least in a psychological and metaphorical sense, it was,, all bodies were subject to public scrutiny based on a national eugenic standard, which rendered as deviant any bodies that failed to meet that standard. Any form of deviance—race, disability, disease, sexuality, or poverty—constituted an affront to national and local sensibilities. Deviant bodies threatened the presentation of America as a vibrant, powerful body. As Chicago’s law so quintessentially demonstrates, American eugenics cast all physical anomalies as equally unacceptable, so that disability was criminalized in the same as race had been, lumping non-white and handicapped citizens with thieves, prostitutes, violent criminals, and other unfortunates. Further, as Susan Schweik points out, “[t]he idea of unsightliness, vague and other-directed, depends on an assumed axis of appropriateness and inappropriateness and on the internal vigilance of each member of the populace” (88). These laws gave white, able-bodied citizens permission to stare at all non-white and non-normative individuals, as well as the right to determine a person’s position on what might be called “the ugly scale.” More significantly, these laws made it a civic duty to cordon off monstrosities and curiosities from mainstream life, thereby branding all those with deviant bodies as freaks and cleansing the nation’s streets, sidewalks, and public spaces. These laws epitomized the notion that for Americans “modernity was controlled appearance” (86).

The ghettoized communities created by these laws became fragmented by amendments to the laws that resulted in boundaries being drawn on and around smaller and smaller groups, even down to individual bodies. In 1911, Chicago’s City Council passed an addendum to its 1881 Ugly Law that specifically barred “exposure of diseased, deformed, or mutilated portions of the body” (293), including “mutilated limbs” (293). On first glance, this amendment specifically focusing on limbs appears to be unnecessary, because the law already on the books legislated against any form of deformity or disability. Concretely specifying a ban on limbs, however, further circumscribed the

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\(^5\) The Chinese Exclusion Act capped Chinese immigration at 1,000 people per year.
boundaries of the acceptable spaces that freaks could occupy and carved up disabled bodies themselves into legislated territory.

Similar ordinances in other cities, using the language of Chicago’s original Ugly Law as a base, added more specific bans. For example, Pennsylvania’s 1891 statewide ban on public disability placed special emphasis on those who “exhibit[ed] any physical deformity . . . which [was] produced by artificial means for hire” (294), thereby criminalizing not only actual disability, but gaffed disability6 as well. Such a move suggests that these laws did not have just erasing disease or begging from the streets at their core. Rather, it suggests a desire that all citizens meet and maintain the illusion of normalcy at all times.

New York’s 1895 citywide ban included not only physical disability, but also any person “who is idiotic or imbecile” (295), and placed an additional ban on public exposure for “pecuniary consideration” (295). Thus, deformity encompasses both physical and mental defects, indicating that the laws sought to eradicate not ugliness, but abnormality of any sort. This expansion defined ugliness and deformity in new ways. Such a move, especially in conjunction with the economic prohibitions included within the New York and Pennsylvania laws, pushes freakery to the edges of American life. Thus, nonconformist bodies wound up in places where they could be exploited by the upper and middle classes, on terms set and defined by the exploiter. These laws removed abnormality from urban life, protected “normal” citizens from having to encounter it, and preserved the image of individual communities as pure. Consequently, each of these cities met all of criteria involved in American exceptionalism and required to turn each into a City on the Hill. In much the same way that Chicago’s 1893 World’s Fair barred freak shows from the White City and relegated them to the Midway or to exhibits outside the fairgrounds, America marginalized its disabled.

This concept of cordoning off freakery and disability from city life was enforced in the punishments imposed on violators of these Ugly Laws. While most Ugly Laws levied fines ranging from $1 in Chicago to $1,000 in New York, they all enforced mandatory imprisonment in the almshouse (or the county poor farm, in the case of the Lincoln and Denver laws) for a term of up to six months per offense. Further, while a 1903 study of the Touro-Shakespeare almshouse in New Orleans claimed that the inmates, particularly those sent there for violating the Ugly Law, were “quite content” and “free to come and go as they please” (qtd. in Schweik 35), internal records show that inmates were allowed to leave once a week, at most, and that the almshouse population suffered from an unusually high death rate. The penal nature of such institutions further criminalized disability and reflected the same attitudes that led to traveling sideshow attractions such as the skeleton of President McKinley’s assassin, as well as to Philadelphia dime museums including both a wax likeness and phrenological charts of H. H. Holmes, who in 1894 was branded America’s first serial killer.

The imprisonment of the disabled helped provided legal precedent for the regulation of disabled Americans’ bodies. Consequently, the Ugly Laws paved the way for the forced sterilization laws. Thanks to the lobbying efforts of Lothrop Stoddard and the American Birth Control League, Indiana passed the nation’s first forced sterilization

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6 Similar to the gaffed freak discussed in Chapter 1, a person with a gaffed disability has no actual disability, but has been dressed or altered to appear disabled.
law in 1907. Within two years of the Supreme Court’s 1929 decision in *Buck v. Bell* that such laws were constitutional, twenty-nine states had passed them; many of them remain in place today. The court declared the virtues of preventing “degenerate offspring to continue their own kind” (qtd. in Schweik 19), with then–Associate Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes famously writing in his decision that “[t]hree generations of imbeciles are enough” (19). By equating physical and mental disability with criminal depravity, the Ugly Laws made it not only socially acceptable, but also legally viable, to control the makeup of the American population.

Reducing crime and subsequently bolstering the community’s economy certainly helped motivate the Ugly Laws. A 1901 Brooklyn editorial pointedly stated that the reason “deformities and monstrosities should be kept out of shopping districts” (qtd. in Schweik 59) had “to do with sales” (59). However, evidence suggests that the laws also sought to ensure that the physically disabled would remain “deformities and monstrosities”—nightmarish, inhuman visions that must be contained. In short, these laws exoticized all deviant bodies as one of two types of freak: those who were displayed in a sideshow or dime museum and those who belonged in one. Ben Reitman, a Chicago-based physician and anarchist, best remembered today as Emma Goldman’s lover, literally mapped out the city’s landscape under rigorously enforced Ugly Laws. On November 17, 1910, Reitman organized what he called “Outcast Night” at the Pacific Hall in New York, ultimately drawing a packed hall of intellectuals, criminals, and other social outcasts. Over the course of the evening, the event, which had drawn several members of the press, featured a series of lectures and discussions given by outcasts in fields ranging from psychology to poetry. At the end of the evening, Reitman presented what he called “Reitman’s Social Geography,” a large map drawn on a bedsheet of an imaginary “peninsular” and islands (Cresswell 207-8). The map, which currently resides in Reitman’s archives at the University of Illinois–Chicago, provides a vision of re-urbanization that relegates each form of deviance to its own demarcated portion of the city and creates a perverse zoological garden.

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7 Reitman also founded a “hobo college” and led a March of the Unemployed in 1908.
Reitman’s plan included such locations as “Niggertown,” “Mongolia,” “Disable Isle,” and “Insane Isle.” Thus, as in a freak show, all deviant bodies have their own permanent display site, available to anyone who wishes to seek them out for his or her own amusement. This setup literally turned the city into a ten-in-one or midway that allowed the curiosity seeker to view racial minorities and the disabled in their “natural habitats.”

Reitman also granted islands to radicals, criminals, and prostitutes, thereby placing all physical and behavioral deviance on an equal platform. In positioning disability and race on islands of social deviance, Reitman shows how the Ugly Laws made physical traits into vices. Visits to these islands, furthermore, were seen as trips to the city’s seedy underbelly, a place full of danger and excitement, not unlike frequenting a whorehouse. Consequently, both the visitor and the city at large maintained their own mirage of normality by isolating undesirables and displacing them to their own urban islands or human zoos.

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8 A ten-in-one was a sideshow that featured ten or more freaks under one tent for one admission price. Each exhibit was traditionally separated from the rest by dividers, so that spectators could visit the realm of each curiosity separately.

9 Midways often featured a host of single freak exhibits set apart from one another, as well as a series of ethnic villages displaying various ethnicities in what was purported to be authentic dress and behavior, all lining a single street.
Reitman placed all of these islands in a “Sea of Isolation,” which surrounded a larger landmass on which he situated the “Land of Respectability.” The westernmost edge of the “Land of Respectability” was bordered by three institutions: the courts, the press, and the police, such that those cordoned off by the Ugly Laws would live outside the protection of the justice system, the free press, and law enforcement. At the southeast corner of Reitman’s map resided the American foundational tenets of Law, Religion, Tradition, Patriotism, and Conventionality, serving to further emphasize the radical separation of the “ugly” from the mythical average American. In this way, the map literalized how the “ugly” existed outside of American values. This comparative normalcy of the city’s residents crossed economic classes: the Land of Respectability included discrete spaces for the middle class and the working poor, thereby equating economic productivity with physical fitness. The legally “ugly” thus provided those who gazed upon them with a mirror to measure their own normalcy and civic worth.

The sole example of a Southern Ugly Law, the 1879 New Orleans Ugly Law, which was passed two years before the Chicago law catalyzed the passage of similar laws across the nation, was noteworthy for its specific prohibition of the “exposure of wounds” (Schweik 29). While the law does not emphasize war wounds, the law’s language encompasses them. The law also specifically ordered punishment against “members of the police force for failing and neglecting the duties imposed on them by this ordinance” (292). Thus, the law did not allow police officers, regardless of their allegiance to the Confederacy, to ignore disabled or disfigured Civil War veterans. In this way, New Orleans could be seen as attempting to expunge its connection to the Civil War and Reconstruction and then repair its sense of having been disfigured by the war and its aftermath, escape from the myth of the Wounded South, and restore its Antebellum image as a potent, vibrant metropolis.

It is, therefore, significant that this attempt to erase the mangled bodies of a lost war comes just prior to the lynching era, in that both the Ugly Law and lynching represented attempts to remove all traces of the South’s losses in the war. While the Ugly Law removes dismembered soldiers from view, lynching removes evidence of Emancipation and Reconstruction. Thus, although the rural South’s landscapes still bore scars from the Civil War, the Ugly Laws and “lynch law” assigned specific spaces, both literal and social, to nonstandard bodies, relegating all those who fell under their jurisdiction to second-class citizenship and ultimately designating them as freaks.

According to Joseph Roach in Cities of the Dead, freaks serve as “performed effigies—those fabricated from human bodies and the associations they evoke—[and] provide communities with a method of perpetuating themselves through specially nominated mediums or surrogates” (36). Based on Roach’s definition, freaks can become leaders in positive civic roles, such as statesmen or artists, and can trigger positive associations, such as someone who is viewed as “freakishly” intelligent. Under these more positive associations, the “freak” represents the idealized vision of how a culture sees itself and provides hope for the future. Du Bois’ Talented Tenth provides an example of this sort of freakishness in that it singled out the best and brightest of the black community as the idealized vision that the black community had for itself. However, as in the case of both lynching and the Ugly Laws, it can also take on an inverse effect, as they both single out

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10 For an extended discussion of these specific anxieties, see Chapter 2.
individuals who deviate from the ideal American. They then use those differences as the basis for continuing the community by excising them.

The Ugly Laws, however, are also connected to the social conventions of the elite circles in Northern American cities, particularly New York and Boston, both places that were instrumental in establishing American urban communities as incarnations of the City on the Hill. For example, in 1881, New York State passed a law requiring that all incoming steamships be rigorously inspected, so as “to prevent the landing of mendicants, cripples, criminals, idiots, &c” (qtd. in Schweik 165). Such laws clearly seek to make American communities off limits in a manner similar to the means by which Society prohibited membership to outsiders, especially those who earned their wealth from what the elite would term undignified means. By expunging both the physically and the socially ugly, America’s civic and social circles alike sought to maintain a pristine homogeneity.

The linking together of criminals, political radicals, and the disabled as equally undesirable exemplifies the pathologizing of criminal behavior and the criminalizing of physical abnormality found in the root of the Ugly Laws and expressed in Reitman’s social geography. The 1908 film *The Thieving Hand* exemplifies these themes. In the film, an honest unfortunate is given an artificial arm and suddenly becomes a kleptomaniac. 11 On its most basic level, this film demonstrates a cultural belief that bodies are either good or bad. While lacking an arm did not in itself destroy the beggar’s character, it led to his receiving the offending appendage in the first place, and his disability and his attempt to feign normalcy simultaneously led to his downfall. Ending with his incarceration, the film suggests that the way to control malevolent bodies is to remove them from society. Finally, the beggar’s new arm is purchased for him at a store specializing in selling limbs, demonstrating the commercial and civic currency tied to normalcy, echoing the then-new fads of skin lightening and hair straightening that had made Madam C. J. Walker the nation’s first African-American millionaire the previous year.

Clearly, immigration laws and cultural texts such as those mentioned above indicate a national movement to preserve the notion that a foreign body was foreign in multiple senses of the word. Much of the policing of normalcy and the enforcement of bodily standards, as Schweik points out, “took place on the municipal level through the ugly law and by other means” (168). These cultural attitudes inform, in significant ways, William Dean Howells’ novel *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, which illustrates how the elite Boston circle of the novel shapes itself through Ugly Laws of its own.

**Blossomed Weeds: Social Mapping in The Rise of Silas Lapham**

Much of the previous scholarship on Howells in general and *The Rise of Silas Lapham* in particular has dealt with the stratified society within the novel as a means of discussing self-sacrifice, 12 business, 13 and the role of Realism in Howells’ fiction as a means of

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11 This notion of “corporeal memory” can be found in a host of cultural texts, beginning with Mary Shelley’s 1818 novel *Frankenstein*, in which the monster is composed of the stitched-together remains of former criminals, and reaching their cultural nadir with Doris Wishman’s 1970 grindhouse film *The Amazing Transplant*, in which a man undergoes a penis transplant and suddenly becomes a serial rapist.

12 For examples of criticism that deals with self-sacrifice, see Barton; Crowley; Dooley; Engeman; Henwood; Murphy; and Oehlschlager.
creating a social consciousness. This chapter suggests that Howells used his depiction of Boston Society as a point of comparison to the Ugly Laws and eugenic attitudes of the era. Just as the Ugly Laws mapped out a city’s geography as a series of islands based on abnormalities, *The Rise of Silas Lapham* maps out Boston’s social landscape into three concentric circles, with genetics and breeding determining a person’s placement within those circles. The lower an individual’s social standing within the novel, the more eugenically inferior that individual is, thereby allowing Howells to represent poor social standing as a disability. Throughout the novel, Boston Society is constructed similarly to the way Anderson describes an invisible community, as indicated by its unflagging revelry toward its Puritan roots and its view of traditional American stereotypes as freakish. By presenting Lapham as a quintessential “American type” down to his roots, the newspaper interview that opens the novel initially appears to laud him. When looked at in the light of the attitudes toward Americanism held by the novel’s elite characters, however, it instead enfreaks him and highlights him as a social outsider. Lapham’s paint, the root of his wealth and his rags-to-riches story, embodies his identity and, consequently, its social grotesqueness extends to him. To an even greater degree, the house Lapham is having built represents him and his social position as ugly, out of fashion, and utterly out of place on Beacon Street. Ultimately, Lapham’s fall from wealth to poverty is represented as a chronic disease that disables him as much as his wound from Gettysburg. While remaining neutral in terms of the morality of Ugly Laws and social borders, the novel uses a “polyphony of voices” (Hamilton 13), each offering a different perspective on ugliness. Moreover, the novel’s focus on ugliness and the connection between breeding and social worth allows Howells to use Boston’s elite social circle as a model for the eugenic attitudes taking hold throughout Late-Nineteenth-Century America.

Throughout the novel, Howells clearly maps out the distinctions among the different social classes. Rather than organize them in a vertical hierarchy, however, he positions them in a set of concentric circles, each of which provides an impermeable barrier. The core in this arrangement houses Boston’s elite families, those whose names automatically carry weight and historical prestige. Howells most thoroughly exemplifies this group through the Coreys, the family that the Laphams wish to marry into and that serves as a foil to the Laphams throughout the novel. The next circle out includes the Laphams and those who have earned their money through their own enterprise or some other equally “vulgar” means. From there, the circles move outward, until they reach the outer fringes that make up the realm of the unfortunate classes, including alcoholics, criminals, radicals, and cripples. The result is a series of closed communities that nest within one another and whose members enfreak those whose communities exist further from the centre than their own.

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13 For examples of criticism that deals with business, see Boland; Dawson; Eby; and Puskar.
14 For examples of criticism that deals with Realism in Howells’ fiction, see Ackerman; Hamilton; Kaplan; Pritchard; and Weimann.
15 For more on the novel’s use of neutrality, see Hamilton; see also Young.
16 For more on Howells using his fiction to objectively reflect the cultural and social forces of his era, see Rohrbach.
This geographical arrangement becomes clear early in the novel when the Corey women reluctantly call on Mrs. Lapham, whom they had met while on vacation at the shore the previous summer. While Mrs. Corey falls back on feigned politeness in her conversation, she ultimately makes the demarcation between Mrs. Lapham and herself clear, telling her that she and her daughters had “never been in [that] part of town before” (Rise 26) and that “all of [their] friends are on the New Land or the Hill”17 (26). The insinuation behind Mrs. Corey’s comments suggests that she sees the Laphams’ wealthy, but unfashionable, neighborhood as “those” parts of town and the type of place that respectable people venture into only for charitable purposes. Further, her reference to “all of her friends” living in the two most fashionable neighborhoods in Boston is intended to remind Mrs. Lapham of her place. Mrs. Corey makes it clear that while she and her daughters may be calling on Mrs. Lapham out of politeness, she does not see Mrs. Lapham as her equal or her friend.

After being told about the Coreys’ visit that evening, Silas Lapham tries to console his wife, urging her to see it as a case of “they don’t trouble us and we don’t trouble them” (27). His reaction suggests that he understands that the Back Bay and Beacon Hill are for those families whose Puritan roots allow them access to those closed spaces and not for him or other members of the nouveau riche. Mrs. Lapham, however, feels Mrs. Corey’s remarks as “a barb” filled with “insinuation,” telling her husband that they left her feeling as if the Laphams “had always lived in the backwoods” (25). By using the word “backwoods,” Howells suggests that Mrs. Corey sees the Laphams as another version of The Jukes or The Kallikaks.18 This particular term stings even more deeply in that Lapham publicly and proudly talks about his rural roots and how just a few years earlier he and his family lived on the Lapham family farm in rural Vermont. Consequently, Mrs. Lapham using the term backwoods shows that, whether intentionally or not, Mrs. Corey has left her feeling like an imposter, a genetically tainted redneck19 whose respectability is a mirage. Furthermore, as a freak, Mrs. Lapham also reminds Mrs. Corey of her own superiority and of who must be kept out of respectable circles.

Interestingly enough, Mrs. Lapham herself is guilty of this same behavior toward Zerilla, Lapham’s secretary and the daughter of the man who sacrificed his own life to save Lapham’s at the Battle of Gettysburg. Mrs. Lapham first sees Zerilla when calling on Lapham at his office. Not recognizing her, Mrs. Lapham immediately becomes jealous of the “very pretty girl sitting at his desk” who seems “quite at home” (314). Further, after noticing Zerilla’s coat and purse hanging on a nail on the wall directly across from Lapham’s own coat, Mrs. Lapham likes “even less than the girl’s good looks this domestication of her garments in her husband’s office” (314), convincing her that Zerilla is Lapham’s mistress and fueling a madness that becomes a “demoniacal possession” (315). This irrational belief that Zerilla is having an affair with her husband and has made

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17 Howells here is referring to the Back Bay and to Beacon Hill, the two most fashionable residential areas of Boston.
18 The Jukes and The Kallikaks are two examples of families used in sociological studies designed to validate the need for eugenics during the 1880s. Casting them in a harshly stereotypical light, the studies concluded that rural Americans were genetically inferior to the respectable classes. For a more-detailed discussion of these studies, see Chapter 1.
19 According to Arthur Herman in How the Scots Invented the Modern World (2001), the term redneck dates back to 1640 in reference to the Covenanters who rejected bishop rule. The Scots are credited with subsequently introducing this term to the United States as early as 1830.
herself at home stems from Mrs. Lapham seeing Zerilla as a woman who does not seem out of place in her husband’s world. Further, Mrs. Lapham’s jealousy moves beyond the sexual and focuses on Zerilla taking on the role in Lapham’s business that she herself had held. Clearly, she sees Zerilla as someone who would be accepted in her own social circles.

Mrs. Lapham’s attitude toward Zerilla changes dramatically, however, when she discovers the girl’s true identity and realizes that she is from the undesirable classes. Her jealousy instantly abates, and her assessment of Zerilla as belonging in Lapham’s circle instantly evaporates. Zerilla is no longer a “very pretty girl” (314) in Mrs. Lapham’s eyes. Instead, Mrs. Lapham now sees Zerilla as “a blossomed weed” (319) who comes from “the same worthless root as her mother” (319). While Zerilla’s beauty allows her to hide her social class from the uninformed, a revelation of Zerilla’s class and bloodline permanently marks and enfreaks her. Further, Howells reveals to the reader that one of the longest-standing fights between the Laphams has been Silas’ insistence that “he was bound to take care of Jim Millon’s worthless wife and her child because Millon had got the bullet that was meant for him” (318). Mrs. Lapham’s attitudes reflect the growing national eugenics and forced sterilization movements. In fact, by the early twentieth century, Margaret Sanger would echo Mrs. Lapham and justify her fervent belief in forced sterilization in her claim that “weeds should be exterminated” (Black 160). Given Zerilla’s mother’s history of alcoholism and sexual promiscuity, Mrs. Lapham clearly sees any investment in Zerilla by Lapham or any other member of his class as an unnecessary burden that hinders Lapham’s own economic growth.

Social class plays a parallel role in Mrs. Lapham’s enfreakment of the Millons and in the Coreys’ views of the Laphams. During a discussion with her husband in which he expresses his confusion at Society’s not accepting him, Mrs. Lapham explains that the basis for membership in the elite “isn’t what you’ve got, and it isn’t what you’ve done exactly. It’s what you are” (Rise 112). Thus, not even becoming a self-made millionaire is enough for Lapham to be included among the highest class; rather, the facts that his millions are self-made and that his own roots are much more common are the factors excluding him. Howells here presents social status as a genetic trait and attempts at upward social mobility as futile.20

Mrs. Lapham’s comments take on additional significance in the light of an earlier conversation between Bromfield Corey and his son Tom about the connections between culture and civilization. Corey discounts the Laphams’ cultural knowledge when he refers to civilization not as “an affair of epochs and nations” (110), but as “an affair of individuals” (110) contingent on whether one has a proper appreciation of the arts. Corey then refers to a sudden trend of young girls who have no appreciation of or interest in the arts, claiming that “they ought to have been clothed in the skins of wild beasts and gone about barefoot with clubs over their shoulders” (110). Here, Howells indicates that going to the theater or the museum constitutes the difference between primitivism and civilization, aligning those who do not enjoy the arts with many of the ethnic and cultural sideshow exhibits that were particularly popular at the time of the novel’s publication.21

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20 For more on Howells presenting social mobility as futile, see Li.
21 Examples of such exhibits include “The Missing Link,” “The Wild Men of Borneo,” and “The Wild Aztec Children.” In each of these exhibits, their freakishness came from their complete lack of civility and their sharp contrast to society’s elite circles.
For Corey, this distinction is so individual that, in some cases, “one brother will be civilized and the other a barbarian” (110). Similarly, Corey claims that there are cases where the “parents [of the primitive young girls] were at least respectful of the things these young animals despised” (110). If one sibling can be born normal and the other a freak, or if two normal parents can give birth to a savage, then in Corey’s view lack of culture is a congenital disability or some other genetic aberration. Corey’s views render the culturally aware as a “City on the Hill,” illustrating how communities create divisions that excise their ugliest members.

Tom tells his father by suggesting that the Laphams are an exception to the rule, pointing out that Lapham and his wife “apologized for not getting the time to read” (110). His father’s dismissal of Tom’s pleas further establishes cultural awareness, and therefore civilization, as something that is inherited, because it is something that only the socially elite can hope to have time for. When Tom then reports that the Laphams are going to have a library in their Beacon Street home filled with books that he has acquired for them, Corey responds with a mocking laughter that suggests Tom is helping pick out a bicycle for a fish. Tom then responds that the Laphams are “not unintelligent people. They are very quick and shrewd and sensible” (110); his father replies, “I have no doubt that some of the Sioux are so. But that is not saying they are civilized” (110). Thus, the Laphams’ intelligence and wealth do not make them potential peers but instead render them freakish in the same manner as did photography showing freaks taking tea or reading. For men like Bromfield Corey, freakishness is as often based on what one is as on what one is not. Because the Laphams do not have a deep Boston-Puritan heritage, they cannot be elite.

**Silas Lapham: The All-American Freak**

During his first discussion with his father about Lapham, Tom Corey weighs Lapham’s relative fitness for Boston Society. Attempting to mitigate Lapham’s reputation as socially unfit, Tom measures Lapham using laxer standards than those used by the Boston elite. According to Tom, had he not previously “passed a winter in Texas, [he] might have found Colonel Lapham too much” (60), adding that he “saw it wouldn’t be fair to test him by [Boston’s] standards” (60). Bromfield Corey disagrees immediately, not just with Lapham’s social fitness, but also with the notion of any other community’s standards as being equal to Boston’s: “the Bostonian ought never to leave Boston. Then he knows—and then only—there can be no standard but ours” (60). The senior Corey shows his disgust at Tom’s willingness to return to Boston “from the cowboys of Texas” and “try Papa Lapham by a jury of his peers” (60). According to Corey, such a practice “ought to be stopped” and “the Bostonian who leaves Boston ought to be condemned to perpetual exile” (61).

This conversation reveals two important cultural attitudes found throughout Late-Nineteenth-Century America. The first is the different standards for Texas and for Boston, which correspond with the slight variations found in each of the different Ugly Laws passed throughout the country, showing how every community enforced its own vision of normalcy, while nevertheless applying the same eugenic concepts that were gaining steam in the scientific community. Second, and more importantly, it shows the degree to which regional and urban centrism subsumed nationalism in terms of how people expressed their allegiances. While the more famous examples of this phenomenon in this period can be found in Southerners and Texans, it can also be found in the
hyperbolic civic pride found in such cities as Chicago, New York, and Boston, all of which had Ugly Laws. The Coreys see themselves as not just being Bostonians first but, as true Bostonians, heirs to its Puritan values. The conversation clearly shows Corey’s willingness to shrink normalcy down to Boston Society’s standards alone. However, further conversations in the novel show Boston Society as treating people poorly for being “All-American.” In these cases, the treatment of these “All-American” types is similar to the way that Boston’s Ugly Laws treated people for being undesirable. Howells establishes fashionable Boston as a community with its own sealed borders protecting it from the ugliness of the rest of the nation. According to Howells:

When the alien hears a group of Boston ladies calling one another, and speaking of all their gentlemen friends, by the familiar abbreviations of their Christian names, he must feel keenly the exile to which he was born; but he is then, at least, in comparatively little danger; while these latent and tacit cousinships open pitfalls at every step around him, in a society where Middlesexes have married Essexes and produced Suffolks for two hundred and fifty years. (161-2)

The novel’s use of such stereotypically English last names shows Boston Society as a community connected to and steeped in its British, Puritan roots. This heritage contrasts sharply with the Irish and other ethnicities that made up most of the city’s middle, working, and unfortunate classes. This arrangement re-maps Boston’s social landscape as a core of gentility and culture surrounded by a series of ghettos based on bodily or genetic differences, turning Boston into a carnival in which Anglo-Saxon high culture finds itself surrounded by a panoply of American freakishness. Throughout the novel, the Coreys make reference to their Puritan roots and express their admiration for the British, particularly their rigid class system. Corey especially laments America’s lack of “a real aristocracy” and expresses his admiration for feudalism (62). These attitudes become even clearer when the Coreys discuss the poor at one of their dinner parties. After Clara Kingsbury shares her idea of allowing the poor to live in the houses of the wealthy while their owners vacation at the shore, Corey surprisingly mentions that if he were poor and saw an empty mansion, he would “break into one of them and camp out on the grand piano” (181). While this revolutionary spirit appears to align him with American values, we later learn that Corey attributes it to his being related to Garibaldi and that he does not see the poor standing up for themselves as an American trait. In fact, Corey shows his disdain for America being the only country where the poor do not stand up for themselves. By casting America’s poor as docile, Corey justifies the subjection of the undesirable classes, suggesting that even they feel they are in their proper civic and social place. Corey’s observations clearly echo the rhetoric of the era, but he also makes clear that America’s poor are the only ones who behave in a domesticated manner, claiming that this attitude comes from the belief that America is a land of endless opportunity, suggesting that American values and Bostonian values are two different things.

Lapham is diametrically opposed to those in this inner circle of gentility when he refuses to sell his land to a group of English investors. Saddled with land that has become

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22 Giuseppe Garibaldi (1807–1882): Patriotic leader who freed Italy from Austrian rule.
nearly worthless and facing complete ruin should he not sell it, Lapham finds potential buyers in a cadre of Englishmen enthusiastic about taking it off his hands for him. At first, Lapham feels guilty about taking money for land with no promise of financial return, and he warns them of the risks. His feelings change, however, after he learns that they are “agents of people in England who had projected the colonization of a sort of community on the spot” (304). Upon learning this news, Lapham feels “a sort of treachery flash through him” (304), illustrating his revulsion at the birth of a new Anglo-centric community. Lapham clearly sees this investment group as a collection of latter-day Puritans, a new breed of the same social elite who have spurned him throughout the novel. His unwillingness to sell them the land, even at the cost of his own financial ruin, shows that he no longer wishes to associate with these types of closed Puritan communities, including the Boston social circle of the Coreys and their friends.

Lapham is described in the novel not only as an outsider, but also as an “All-American” type, thereby enfreaking him in the eyes of the Coreys and the rest of the socialites who populate the novel. The first instance of Lapham being characterized as such is the newspaper interview between Lapham and Bartley Hubbard that opens the novel. In the opening moments of the novel, Lapham is interviewed for Hubbard’s “Solid Men of Boston” series. As Chapter 2’s discussion of masculinity and manliness shows, inclusion as a “Solid Man” indicates that this interview will be antithetical to Lapham’s being thought of as a freak. Lapham complains throughout the novel that his money “is as good as Bromfield Corey’s” and that he is “twice the man” that any of the socialites are. Such self-aggrandizing on Lapham’s part comes from his wealth not being enough to buy him into the inner circle, a social move that would allow him to shed his status as a freak, as eugenicists of the era regularly designated people with rural backgrounds.

Hubbard opens his column by describing Lapham’s physical appearance. According to Hubbard:

He has a square, bold chin, only partially-concealed by the short, reddish-gray beard, growing to the edges of his firmly closing lips. His nose is short and straight; his forehead good, but broad rather than high; his eyes blue, and with a light to them that is kindly or sharp according to his mood. He is of medium height, and fills an average arm-chair with solid bulk, which, on the day of our interview was unpretentiously clad in a business suit of blue serge. His head droops from a short neck, which does not trouble itself to rise much over a pair of massive shoulders. (3-4)

According to Hubbard’s description, the most unusual feature of Lapham’s appearance is how completely normal he is in all respects. From his facial features to his build to his clothes, Lapham is described here as the very model of American normalcy. Through such traits as his “solid bulk” and his “massive shoulders”, Lapham clearly exhibits the sort of masculine traits valued in Late-Nineteenth-Century America. Moreover, Lapham’s blue eyes suggest a pure white bloodline and his blue serge business suit breathes respectability and distances him from the unfortunate classes. By opening the novel with this description of Lapham, Howells presents to the reader a man who is normal by all outward indications. Lapham, in Hubbard’s words, looks the part of “a fine type of the successful American” (3).
In narrating his autobiography to Hubbard, Lapham reveals details that present him as a latter-day “Ragged Dick”[23] and a model of the “rags to riches” component of the American Dream.[24] Lapham narrates his childhood and early adult years on a farm in Vermont, his years spent working in the fields, and the pivotal moment when his father found what would become the source of the family fortune in a manner similar to many oilmen—discovering a paint mine on their farm under a fallen tree. Further, Lapham shows Hubbard a recent family photograph that captures his family as containing all of the prototypical American types, ranging from his brother Bill the lawyer to his cousin Hazard the preacher to his cousin Willard the miner. The photograph underscores Lapham’s normalcy, showing that he comes from “decent, honest-looking, sensible people” (7) and that his own family photograph is “the standard family-group photograph, in which most Americans have figured at one time or other” (8). Thus, Howells presents Lapham as a paragon of normalcy, the “American type” who has been born and bred of traditional American stock and who has a background that corresponds to that of the stereotypical American. As Lapham proudly tells Hubbard, “I was bound to be an American of some sort from the word Go!” (4). In short, Silas Lapham resembles many of Howells’ readers (and possibly even Howells himself)[25] with regard to their actual or desired class.

While Lapham narrates his story with pride and seriousness, Hubbard’s column ridicules the details of Lapham’s life. In describing Lapham’s childhood, Hubbard writes that Lapham’s “hardships and poverty were sweetened . . . by a father who, if somewhat inferior in education, was no less ambitious for the advancement of his children” (5). Hubbard describes Lapham’s parents as “unpretentious people, religious after the fashion of the time” who “taught their children the simple virtues of the Old Testament and Poor Richard’s Almanac” (5). By describing Lapham’s family as being of an old-fashioned rural type, something straight out of a Doris Ulmann[26] photograph, Hubbard suggests that Lapham himself also belongs to that category. Just as Mrs. Lapham later in the novel sees Zerilla as a “flowered weed,” Hubbard presents Lapham as such to Boston’s elite. No matter how much money his paint may have earned him, Lapham still comes across to Boston Society as uncultured and ignorant, a minstrelized version of the American Dream.

Hubbard also lampoons Lapham’s wound from the Battle of Gettysburg as part of a sort of folk mythology along the lines of Mike Fink:[27] “The Colonel bears imbedded in the muscle of his right leg a little memento of the period in the shape of a minie-ball, which he jocularly referred to as his thermometer, and which relieves him from the necessity of reading ‘The Probabilities’ in his morning paper” (18). While Lapham’s war

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23 Main character of a serialized novel of the same title by Horatio Alger. Serialized in 1867 and published in novel form in 1868, it tells the story of a young bootblack’s rise to respectability in New York. Received favorably by readers, the book ultimately spawned five sequels, all featuring Ragged Dick as the protagonist.

24 For more on how the novel complicates the traditional “rags to riches” polemic, see Murphy.

25 For more on the suggestion that Lapham represents Howells himself, see Marchand.

26 American photographer (1882–1934) noted for her candid photographs of the people of Appalachia.

27 Legendary boatman and brawler (c. 1770/1780–c. 1823) whose exploits were commonly mythologized in tall tales throughout the nineteenth century.
injury does not connote the type of shame that Confederate wounds often did,\textsuperscript{28} it is still evidences Lapham’s peculiarities and makes him seem like a folksy rube. The newspaper interview, therefore, foreshadows how Lapham will be enfreaked for the American qualities of which he is so proud.

By first describing Lapham as an All-American in a way that most readers would associate with normalcy and then later enfreaking him for those same traits, the novel illustrates just how precarious the borders of closed communities are and how subjective the lines of enfreakment are. Howells uses Lapham’s exclusion from Society and his frequent characterization as “grotesque,” “vulgar,” and “unfit” as a means of turning the tables on his readers and shifting them from the role of the enfreaker to the role of the enfreaked. This process is further enhanced by Lapham’s identifying himself with his paint and ultimately with his new house.

“Like My Own Blood”: The Embodiment of Silas Lapham

While being interviewed, Lapham affectionately boasts to Hubbard about his paint to a degree that shows that his feelings exceed the usual business-based pride: “That paint is like my own blood to me” (15). On the surface, this comment suggests that Lapham has a great deal of passion for his business and, since it bears his name, perhaps identifies with his paint; however, further examination reveals that his identification with his paint runs much deeper.\textsuperscript{29} In the middle of the interview, Lapham shows off his products to Hubbard, proudly explaining, “’that’s about our biggest package; and here,’ . . . laying his hand affectionately on the head of a very small keg, as if it were the head of a child, which it resembled in size, ‘this is the smallest’” (11). This connection between the paint keg and a child, along with Lapham’s comparing the paint to his blood, entwines the paint with Lapham’s DNA and thus makes it a critical component of his civic and social status. Lapham then shows Bartley his premium brand of paint: “THE PERSIS BRAND.” Named after Mrs. Lapham, the paint also alludes to a fertile region in ancient Mesopotamia, showing that Lapham’s ancestors and descendants alike have permanently been colored.

The connection of the paint to Lapham’s blood takes on further importance in the context of the novel’s focus on bloodlines and breeding. Lapham shows himself to be a bit of a eugenicist when discussing Tom’s fitness to enter into the paint business with him. According to Lapham, “a thing has got to be born in a man; and if it ain’t born in him, all the privations in the world won’t put it there, and if it is, all the college training won’t take it out” (101-2). Lapham here is praising Tom’s ability to work, which he notes on his first meeting Tom, telling Mrs. Lapham that despite Tom currently being a man of leisure, “there’s stuff in him” (53). Conversely, the next scene of the novel shows Bromfield Corey encountering Tom for the first time since Tom has returned from a lengthy vacation. Expressing his admiration for Tom’s idleness, Corey exclaims that it’s “astonishing what a hardy breed the young club-men are” (57). Both Lapham and Corey tie social inheritance inevitably to genetic inheritance. However, whereas Corey has left Tom an inheritance of social clubs and idleness, Lapham has left his daughters Irene and Penelope an inheritance of mineral paint.

\textsuperscript{28} See Chapter 2 for a full discussion of the shame Southerners attached to war wounds.

\textsuperscript{29} For alternative readings of what the paint symbolizes, see Graham Thompson; see also Todd.
The socially crippling results of Lapham linking his own identity to his paint become particularly clear in the first conversation between Mr. and Mrs. Corey after the latter learns of Tom’s intention to go into the paint business. Completely distraught, Mrs. Corey refers to the prospect of Tom becoming associated with Lapham’s paint as “horrid,” “hideous,” and “nasty” (87-8)—words strikingly similar to the way she describes Lapham himself—and describes the idea of Tom earning honest money through a financially viable business as his “throwing his life away” (88). Clearly, Mrs. Corey regards becoming involved with something as common as paint as nothing short of enfreakment.

Mrs. Corey is even more terrified of Tom’s assumed romantic interest in Irene, Lapham’s youngest daughter, whom she and her husband dub “the Paint Princess” (88). In fact, Mrs. Corey ultimately admits that she could “get on with the paint, but not with the princess” (89), despite the fact that “she is very pretty and she is well-behaved” (89). Mrs. Corey’s response here shows the ways in which period families such as the Armours, who earned their money through labor and selling to the masses, were often enfreaked by families such as the Astors, who did not. Lapham himself realizes this distinction and understands that the very mineral paint that he believes should provide his daughters access to the Coreys in fact bars them. Lapham “knew who the Coreys were very well, and, in his simple, brutal way he had long hated their name as a symbol of splendor which, unless he should live to see at least three generations of his descendants gilded with mineral paint, he could not hope to realize in his own” (85). In short, his association with his paint both illustrates his status and causes his name to be as handicapped to the elite as if it were Kallikak.

Lapham, however, is linked to more than just his paint, as the new house he is building on Beacon Street also symbolizes Lapham’s social identity. The novel most definitively links Lapham to his new house during his last visit. Upon entering, Lapham “above all else detect[s] the odor of his own paint” (292), thereby suggesting that along with his paint, Lapham himself permeates the house. Howells, moreover, repeatedly describes the house as unfashionable, out of place, and outdated, all of which are also aspects of Lapham’s identity. Howells presents the house as unfashionable at the beginning of the novel when he reveals that Lapham’s land is on the water side of Beacon Street, which Mrs. Corey takes great pains to describe as the unfashionable side of the street. Further, each of Lapham’s suggestions to the architect, from long, straight staircases to black-walnut finish, is rejected as being out of style. Lapham spends most of the novel building a house that, like him, has no business in the fashionable neighborhoods of Boston and sticks out freakishly in its more respectable surroundings.

The word used most frequently to describe Lapham’s suggestions for the house is “ugly.” Lapham initially rejects the architect’s suggestion of furnishing the drawing room in white marble, because he “thought it had gone out long ago” (39). The architect, however, reassures Lapham that “really beautiful things can’t go out. They may disappear for a little while, but they always come back. . . . It’s only the ugly things that stay out after they’ve had their day” (39). The implication is that Lapham’s impending presence on Beacon Street is a fluke that everyone will look back upon with ridicule. Clearly, Howells uses these eugenically coded comments to equate the Coreys and their peers

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30 Howells based Lapham’s house on his own. For more on this connection, see Kuchera.
with white marble and the Laphams with the black walnut that Lapham covets for the house. Howells furthers this point when Reverend Sewell, after visiting the Laphams on the Vermont farm at the end of the novel, reports that Lapham was “rather shabby and slovenly in dress, and he had fallen unkempt, as to the country fashion, as to his hair and beard and boots” (339). Further, Reverend Sewell points out that Lapham fits in better in this rural environment, claiming that “[t]he Colonel was more the Colonel in those hills than he ever could have been on the Back Bay” (339). By contrast, during Lapham’s last visit to the house, a police officer accosts him, thinking that “some tramp got in” (292). While Lapham looks completely out of place in his own house on Beacon Street, he fits perfectly into a rural environment that looks like it could be the redneck exhibit on a midway or even one of the communities featured in studies like Dugdale’s The Jukes. In short, Lapham comes across at the end of the novel as a stereotypical hick who is now home in his natural environment.

The connection between Lapham’s house and his own freakishness is most sharply examined through the fire that permanently destroys the house. Upon arriving at the scene of the fire with Penelope, Lapham discovers a “crowd gazing and gossiping with shouts and cries of hysterical laughter before the burning house” (292). Among the throng of spectators, Lapham notices “a party who seemed to have run out from dinner in some neighboring house” whose ladies “were fantastically wrapped up” (292). Further, Lapham distinctly hears a young girl gush to her male escort, “Isn’t it perfectly magnificent! I wouldn’t have missed it on any account. Thank you so much, Mr. Symington, for bringing us out!” (294). In reply, Mr. Symington boasts, “We don’t do things by halves in Boston” (294). Clearly, the crowd turns Lapham’s house burning to the ground into a spectacle, a serendipitous source of community entertainment. However, awestruck spectators give the event a carnivalesque atmosphere similar to that found at a sideshow or a lynching during this period.

The connections between the house burning and a freak show or lynching go beyond the superficial connections of the crowd’s similarity in atmosphere to the lynching of Sam Hose described in Chapter 2 and beyond the significance of fire in Late-Nineteenth-Century America, also described in Chapter 2. Rather, parallels can be drawn to the role Lapham’s metaphorical destruction plays in the community. The phrase “We don’t do things by halves in Boston” (294) applies to Lapham himself in that his presence in the neighborhood would have been only in body. The burning of the house, therefore, purges an outsider from the community, an outsider whom the crowd blames for his own misfortune by mockingly chiding that “he should have had a coat of his own non-combustible paint on it” (294). The next day, furthermore, the newspapers discover that Lapham had allowed his insurance to expire the week before and they “[light] up the hackneyed character of their statements with the picturesque interest of [this] coincidence” (296). Consequently, Society’s treatment of Lapham as inferior is, in its mind, validated. The house burning then provides the community with a chance to rid themselves of this would-be pretender to their Puritan circles, to release their anxieties about their own positions within those circles, and to remind themselves of their own genealogical superiority.

The novel completes this connection between the house burning and a lynching through its description of the house itself on the morning after it burns. As Lapham walks past the house’s “smoke-stained shell” the next morning, he looks up at the house and
notices that “the windows looked the eye-sockets of a skull down upon the blackened and trampled snow of the street; the pavement was a sheet of ice, and the water from the engines had frozen, like streams of tears, down the face of the house, and hung in icy tags from the window-sills and copings” (296). Like a lynched body, the house remains on display as a reminder of its supposed transgressions against the community’s way of life. Further, as the embodiment of Lapham, the house takes on his ugliness externally, allows the crowd that stops to gaze at it to gaze metaphorically on Lapham himself, and serves as visual evidence of Lapham’s enfreakment. Like the aberrant bodies regulated under the city’s Ugly Law, Lapham’s house must now be removed in order to preserve the appearance of civic normalcy. The novel brings this connection between Society and these eugenically based laws full circle through the disease-based language and imagery Howells uses throughout, particularly in describing Lapham’s final financial collapse.

Diseased Bodies: Lapham’s Final Enfreakment

The novel frequently connects economic and civic health with physical health. For example, the equation between good looks and good citizenship instills Mrs. Lapham with a sense of trust toward Rogers, Lapham’s crooked former business partner. Rogers wins Mrs. Lapham over to his side in his effort to weasel money out of Lapham by looking the part of a respectable citizen. Through Rogers, the novel shows the conflicting attitudes toward the Ugly Laws held by many during this era. Whereas the Coreys reflect the attitudes of those who believe in the Ugly Laws, Rogers reflects the fallacy of allowing laws such as the Ugly Laws to determine who belongs in public realm and who does not. Despite the fact that “there isn’t a slipperier rascal unhung in America than Milton K. Rogers” (304), he disguises his degeneracy because has an air of respectability about him:

His sere, dull-brown whiskers and the mustache closing over both lips were incongruously and illogically clerical in effect, and the effect was heightened for no reason by the parchment texture of his skin; the baldness extending to the crown of his head was like a baldness made up for the stage. What his face expressed chiefly was a bland and beneficent caution. Here, you must have said to yourself, is a man of just, sober, and prudent views, fixed purposes, and the type of good citizenship that avoids debt and hazard of any kind. (257)

Because Rogers looks as if he belongs in a boardroom or on a pulpit, Mrs. Lapham falsely believes that he holds the same values of honesty and decency that she associates with people in that position, to the degree that she sides with him over her own husband. By contrast, Lapham’s appearance has been eroding of late under the stress of his financial decline, to the degree that one of his employees notices that “the old man has been looking kind of yellow” (256), a color coded in both racist language and chronic illness–based associations. Moreover, Rogers makes his pleas to Mrs. Lapham by himself, leaving his “invalid wife and daughter” (307), much as the Ugly Laws would have barred them from public life. Rogers’ hiding them away indicates his fear that their ugliness detracts from his own credibility. Even once she learns of Rogers’ treacherous intentions to ruin Lapham for his own financial gain, Mrs. Lapham responds in disbelief,

31 For scholarship on how Howells treats black bodies in his novels, see Wonham.
Howells first illustrates this concept during Lapham and Corey’s initial conversation with each other as they discuss Tom’s prospects for being successful in his work with Lapham. Lapham compares business to physical training and compares his own business success to physical fitness, bragging to Corey:

Why, when I started this thing, I didn’t more than half understand my own strength. I wouldn’t have said, looking back, that I could have stood the wear and tear of what I’ve been through. But I developed as I went along. It’s just like exercising your muscles in a gymnasium. You can lift twice or three times as much after you’ve been in training a month as you could before. (133)

Here, Lapham clearly equates his financial health with his physical health. The blame for a failed business, therefore, also falls on the businessman himself, suggesting that if he had spent more time at the “gymnasium,” then his business would also be healthy. This attitude mirrors the eugenic attitudes of the period, which placed the blame on the sick and disabled for their condition and reacted to disability as if it were an outward indication of a person’s inner character.

Similarly, Lapham assures Corey that Tom has what it takes to make it in business, despite having been allowed to spend most of his life idle. Lapham assures Corey that Tom’s “going through college won’t hurt him—he’ll soon slough all that off—and his upbringing won’t” (133). Lapham then reminisces about other cases like Tom whom he has seen succeed despite their upbringing, remembering how he “noticed in the army that some of the fellows who had the most go-ahead were fellows who hadn’t ever had much more to do than girls before the war broke out” (133). Lapham’s connection between idleness and femininity is reflected in his initial reaction to learning that Tom does not have a trade, averring that he likes “to see a man act like a man. I don’t like to see him taken care of like a young lady” (53). Lapham clearly associates idleness with emasculation, a disability in its own right in Late-Nineteenth-Century America. Further, Howells here turns the tables, if only briefly, on the Coreys and enfreaks both Tom and his idling father. By enfreaking Tom and his father, the novel illustrates the absurdity and capriciousness of the lines drawn between freakery and normalcy, showing that anyone can become a freak if the boundaries of normalcy are shifted the right way.

Moreover, Howells uses Lapham’s attitudes to show the precarious relationship that even the most normal person has to disability and freakery by having Lapham’s own standards work against him as a result of his own financial ruin. Howells medicalizes Lapham’s slide into bankruptcy, comparing “Lapham’s financial disintegration” to “the course of some chronic disorder, which has fastened itself upon the constitution” (287-8). Howells’ use of disease imagery thus places the blame for Lapham’s financial failures squarely on Lapham’s own shoulders, rather than on bad luck.

Throughout the novel, Lapham corporealisizes his business, even referring to his workers as “hands.” The business is presented in terms of having a body, just as the paint represents Lapham’s blood. Once that body becomes “disordered,” it becomes stigmatized, like all aberrant bodies, a condition made visible by Lapham’s physical
changes as his bankruptcy progresses. At one point, Lapham and Irene visit a pharmacy to obtain a sleeping potion. As Lapham requests the draught, the apothecary warily notes that Lapham looks “as if he had not slept for a week; his fat eyelids drooped over his glassy eyes, and his cheeks and throat hung flaccid” (231). Earlier in the novel, Howells describes how Lapham and his peers treat physical illness. Throughout Lapham’s circle of acquaintances, “they complained when they were sick, but made no womanish inquiries after one another’s health, and certainly paid no visits of sympathy” (140), thereby suggesting that they practice their own sort of social eugenics in casting diseased or distorted bodies to the side and viewing them callously. Similarly, once Lapham’s business becomes sick, it too becomes a source of embarrassment, just as Rogers’ lame wife and daughter are a source of social embarrassment to him. Lapham is disgraced not solely by those in the Coreys’ social circle, but also by his peers and even his own employees, as indicated by a worker commenting on how he doesn’t “like to see a man of [Lapham’s] build look yellow—much” (256). Consequently, Lapham’s failures cast him as a cripple even more than the minie-ball that’s lodged in his leg does.

Lapham’s decline is chronic, as opposed to acute, thereby making clear that Lapham has been permanently financially crippled. In his existence on the farm in Vermont, Lapham “was more broken than he knew by his failure; it did not kill, as it often does, but it weakened the spring once so strong and elastic” (331). Lapham’s destruction takes place on two fronts. Perhaps most clearly to the reader, Lapham’s ruin has broken him psychologically, stripping him of “that bragging note of his” (331). Lapham’s nerves have been shattered to the degree that “there [is] no mechanical sense of coming back” (330), leaving him so emotionally fractured that “this [is] as much the end of his proud, prosperous life as death itself could have been” (330). Lapham, however, has also been destroyed physically, as indicated in the physical changes Reverend Sewell notes in his visit to the Laphams, particularly with regard to his “shabby” and “unkempt” manner.

Throughout the novel, Lapham has been socially enfreaked by the Coreys, with Mrs. Corey sharing her husband’s view that “the entire Lapham tribe is distasteful” (251; emphasis added). Lapham remains socially enfreaked following his collapse, as shown in Mrs. Corey expressing her disgust at Tom’s impending marriage to Penelope by describing the Laphams as “the last set we could have wished him to marry into” (324). However, Lapham’s poverty has now enfreaked him in the more traditional way. He has gone from a man building a home on the Back Bay to a man accosted by a police officer and mistaken for a tramp in that same home, from a “moral force” (62) to a “moral spectacle” (339), from the paragon of normalcy found in the interview that opens the novel to the specimen of rural freakery that closes the novel. Consequently, Howells closes the novel having fully drawn a parallel between the rigid bloodline borders drawn by the social elite in cities like Boston and New York and the parceling of urban landscapes in order to close their borders to the enfreaked, thereby showing social standards as another outlet for the eugenic impulses pulsating throughout Late-Nineteenth-Century America. Whether through Ben Halleck, the cripple whose decision to move to Uruguay opens this chapter, or through Silas
Lapham, Howells regularly populated his fiction with characters whom Society and civilization alike have ostracized from their borders and branded as unsightly objects.

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Chapter 5  Freaks and Monsters:  
The Sideshow of Early Cinema

April 23, 1896 witnessed the American debut\(^1\) of what would become both one of the most popular and one of the most infamous attractions at vaudeville shows and midways across America. The attraction in question was not a new human oddity, a deadly wild animal, or a supposed savage brought back from deepest, darkest Africa. It was the Vitascope. Invented by Charles Francis Jenkins and Thomas Armat,\(^2\) this device would soon be hailed by some as miraculous and scorned by others as immoral. Based on the Kinetoscope,\(^3\) which had debuted three years earlier and filled penny arcades ever since, the Vitascope was the first projecting motion picture camera. Shocking its primarily unsophisticated viewing audience at its debut, the Vitascope showed a ballet being performed in an arcade as part of a vaudeville act. Starting with this exhibition of projected motion pictures, a new form of entertainment for the masses was born: one that would ultimately replace the sideshow, the circus, and the dime museum as the most popular American form of the freak show.

In becoming America’s primary purveyor of freakishness, motion pictures both catered to and assisted in Americans’ shifting the cultural meaning attached to the freak. In *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self* (1978), Leslie Fiedler advances the theory that freaks fascinate the “normal” by appearing to be part of the human family but at the same time alienatingly different. According to Fiedler, the freak exists in the space in between the disabled and the monstrous. Consequently, the freak “stirs both supernatural terror and natural sympathy” (24). The exact location of the freak in between the supernatural monster and the naturally deformed has shifted over time, with some cultures viewing the freak with pity and others viewing it with fear. From the 1880s through the early twentieth century, America’s golden age of more traditional freak shows, Americans’ definition of freakishness leaned more toward disability than monstrosity. While freaks were shunned and stigmatized for being corporally aberrant, that response was based primarily on the discomfort caused by the freak’s underlying humanity. However, beginning with the American debut of the film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* in 1920 and that of *Nosferatu* in 1922, the definition of the freak began to slide toward the monstrous, a trend that continued throughout the 1920s as sideshows and dime museums virtually disappeared from the American landscape. By 1932, when Paramount released *Island of Lost Souls* (1931) and MGM released *Freaks*, Americans associated freaks more with scientific monstrosities than with the physically disabled, a shift made evident through analysis of the content and reception of both films. Not only had the medium Americans used to view freaks changed, but the very cultural meaning of the freak had as well. Before we can examine this change in the definition and exhibition of

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1. The first public demonstration of a motion picture machine was on March 22, 1895, when the Lumière brothers presented their Cinématographe in Paris, France. The film shown was *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory*.

2. While Jenkins and Armat invented the machine, then known as a Phantoscope, they sold the rights to Thomas Edison. Edison quickly changed the name to the Vitascope and billed himself as the machine’s inventor.

3. The Kinetoscope was the first motion picture camera designed for films to be viewed by one viewer at the time through a peephole viewer located at the top of the device.
freakishness, it is essential to first explore the cultural meanings traditionally attached both to horror tales and to the monster.

“A Symptom of a Disease”: Horror Films and Disabled Viewers

In *The Philosophy of Horror, or, Paradoxes of the Heart* (1990), Noël Carroll opens by distinguishing between what he calls natural-horror, which includes everything from natural disasters to family emergencies to mass genocide, and what he calls art-horror, which includes textual forms of horror including literature and film. According to Carroll, what separates horror from other genres is that horror is “defined by its intended ability to raise a certain affect” (14; emphasis in original). Further, Carroll argues that this affect or emotional response both “runs parallel to” and is “cued by the emotions of the characters” (16). This aspect of horror opposes the concept of the freak in the late nineteenth century, in that the spectators’ responses to freakishness was cued by their own anxieties about how well they measured up to the standards of normalcy established by American eugenicists. However, as we will see when we discuss the audience reaction to *Freaks* (1932), cinema had the ability to construct certain responses in its audience with regard to freakishness as well as horror.

Moreover, part of the role of the freak show in American culture has traditionally involved alleviating a sense of disability in the spectators. The sideshow reassured its white, able-bodied visitors that they were normal in much the same way that lynching allowed Southern communities to purge a sense of disabled Southern masculinity. Both the anxieties attached to freakishness and the purging of those fears are inherent in the horror film. Carroll describes horror viewership as “a potentially disabling experience” (199), in that horror films lead to the able-bodied being controlled emotionally and even physically by the freakish characters within the film. Thus, the killing of the freak at the end of the film, a nearly uniform staple of 1920s horror film, by white, able-bodied characters serves to purge the physical and eugenic-based anxieties of its audience. At the end of *The Phantom of the Opera* (1925), for example, the Phantom is swarmed by a torch-wielding mob motivated by bloodlust and revenge. By having a mob kill the freak that is menacing an otherwise normal society, the film reassures its viewers that by bonding together, they have the ability to defend themselves against outsiders and the deformations they imply.

In *Hideous Progeny: Disability, Eugenics, and Classic Horror Cinema* (2012), Angela Smith shows horror films temporarily disabling their viewers by pointing out that they produce revulsion and fear, emotional responses that are physiological in nature (199). Carroll similarly describes horror as “a shuddering or shivering . . . a symptom of a disease” (24). Some of the other sensations, he points out, that horror films can cause, with or without the viewer’s consent, include “muscular contractions, tingling, paralysis, trembling, and nausea” (24). In short, horror has the ability to both control and contaminate the viewer’s body and, as Linda Williams notes, force the viewer’s body into “a mimicry of emotion or sensation of the body on the screen” (730). This response to fear parallels the response that white, able-bodied men often had to freaks at the turn of the twentieth century. For example, white Southern men often responded to black men,
especially highly masculine black men, with a fear that led to the white men considering themselves physically disabled and sexually emasculated. Further, Southern whites viewed any contact between whites and blacks, especially between white women and African-American men, as contaminating their eugenic purity. Thus, monster movies controlled their viewers in a similar way that lynchings and other late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century freak shows did.

Smith further demonstrates that horror movies exemplified impurity as well as a threat to the eugenic ideal when she discusses a series of studies conducted by the Motion Picture Review Council from 1929 through 1931 to determine the health effect that horror films had on young people. Among the monographs published on these studies, the most respected was Henry James Forman’s *Our Movie Made Children* (1933). Among other studies, Forman cites one conducted in 1927 by Dr. Samuel Renshaw at the Ohio State Bureau of Juvenile Research. According to Forman, Renshaw found that horror movies disrupted the sleep patterns of children and put them at risk of developing sleep disorders. Therefore, Forman concluded that “the very best hygienic practice” would be to “limit children’s attendance at certain kinds of films” (84).

Forman cites a follow-up study two years later at Ohio State conducted by Drs. Christian Ruckmick and Wendell Dysinger, in which children were taken to a theater and hooked up to an electrical instrument called a psycho-galvanometer. Ruckmick and Dysinger then showed the children a series of “ordinary” films, with horror films placed randomly among them. The test measured children’s pulse rates while using the psycho-galvanometer to measure changes in the body chemistry and electrical currents generated under stress. Ruckmick and Dysinger then used this data to determine the “intensity of the emotions” caused by horror films. While films such as *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1920) and *The Lost World* (1925) affected children’s heart rates and emotional intensity, *The Phantom of the Opera* had a particularly strong effect on the children viewing it. According to Forman, children would scream, flee the theater, and even faint and vomit due to the intensity of their fright. Such responses ultimately led to Forman claiming that horror films have “an effect very similar to shell-shock” and can “sow the seeds in the system for future neuroses and nervous disorders” (206). Consequently, horror movies were seen as threatening America’s eugenic standards by displaying the enfreaked and simultaneously disabling America’s children.

These studies, however, ultimately led to claims that movies, particularly horror movies, threatened far more than Americans’ physical health. The “Reasons Supporting the Preamble of the Code” argued that while entertainment could help rebuild “the bodies and souls of human beings,” it was important to determine if a given film was “helpful or harmful to the human race.” According to the Code, art that was “morally evil” tended to “degrade human beings, or to lower their standards of life and living.” Thus, the Code ultimately declared that the well-being of the United States depended on proper oversight of films. According to the Code, employing language with the same eugenic overtones used to enfreak those with aberrant bodies in Turn-of-the-Century America, “wrong entertainment lowers the whole living condition and moral ideals of a race.” Noted eugenicist Henry Fairfield Osborn declared motion pictures to be one of

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6The “Reasons Supporting the Preamble of the Code” is an addendum attached to the end of the Motion Picture Production Code, also referred to as the Hays Code. The Hays Code, drafted and loosely enforced in 1930, became strictly enforced starting in 1934.
several factors leading to the growing degeneracy of the American race. Osborn even went so far as to claim that because of unsuitable movies, “the original American standards are all insidiously tending toward moral decadence” (qtd. in Smith 211). This supposed ability of horror films to disable their viewers physically and morally renders the monsters exemplary late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century freaks.

Unnatural Impurities: Defining the Monstrous
Carroll’s primary criterion for a story to be a horror story is that it has to contain a nonhuman monster, rather than a serial killer or a vicious warlord. Carroll’s restriction of these monsters to supernatural beings may, however, be too narrow, particularly with regard to the horror films of the 1920s, which primarily enfreaked the congenitally disabled. Under Carroll’s limitation, such films as *The Phantom of the Opera*, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1923), and *The Cat and the Canary* (1927) are not horror films despite audiences reacting to them as such. While they cannot be described as supernatural, the monsters of the 1920s, including those in all three of these films, can best be described as unnatural. However, as the decade progressed, supernatural monsters began to emerge, starting with the vampire played by Lon Chaney in *London after Midnight* (1927). With the 1931 release of *Dracula*, supernatural monsters replaced unnatural monsters and freaks as the predominant threat in horror films. This distinction between the supernatural and the unnatural helps signal the cultural transformation of the freak from the disabled toward the monstrous.

The unnatural monsters frequently found in the horror films of the 1920s are exemplified by the parade of deformed villains played by Lon Chaney in such films as *The Penalty* (1920), *West of Zanzibar* (1928), and most famously, *The Unknown* (1927), in which Chaney plays a circus knife-thrower named Alonzo the Armless. Although hideously ugly, mangled amputees or cripples, these monsters were all still humans. Thus, many of the monsters of the 1920s were manifestations of Sigmund Freud’s concept of the Uncanny, the psychological response when familiarity and threat stem from the same person or object. Freud theorized that the things we find most terrifying appear that way because they once felt familiar. Thus, someone or something becomes a monster when it cannot be fully rationally processed, in much the same way that sideshow attractions like Prince Randian⁷ or the Hilton Sisters⁸ generated responses ranging from unease to terror in their spectators.

Robin Wood argues that the horror film formula is “normality [being] threatened by the monster” (175). Similarly, Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell argue that horror films are “central in the recirculation, unveiling, and display of anomalies” (98). Furthermore, as Smith points out, one of the most common tropes in early horror films is the “secure: horror film, in which monstrosity is contained or destroyed and normalcy is restored” (5). The eugenic language here presents horror films as providing the secure

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⁷ Prince Randian was born with no arms or legs and was exhibited as the Living Torso. He was most famous for his act in which he rolled and lit a cigarette.

⁸ The Hilton Sisters were a pair of conjoined twins who were joined at the liver. They achieved fame through their vaudeville act in which they sang and danced, as well as through their quest to find a state that would grant them a marriage license.
spaces, once created by sideshows and lynchings, in which the threat of physically aberrant bodies is both presented and ultimately safely contained. The monstrous bodies found in early horror films represent many types of enfreakment common in late-nineteenth-century freak shows, particularly race and disfigurement.

In addition to being regarded as unnatural, or “inconceivable,” monsters are also seen as “unclean and disgusting” (Carroll 21) or, as with other freaks, impure. Carroll defines impurity as being “categorically interstitial, categorically contradictory, incomplete, or formless” (32). While this definition applies to monsters such as Quasimodo, who appear to be somewhere between man and beast, it also applies to freaks as freakishness was defined in Turn-of-the-Century America, with connotations of disease and deformity. According to Carroll, the monster’s “ugliness and indescribability” (21) render it so physically repulsive that “it often produces nausea” (22). Monsters, particularly those in horror films, are so often associated with disease that making physical contact with them can be deadly and their monstrosity contagious.

The threat of monsters is reflected in the film industry’s view of the monster films that exploded onto the screen in the early 1930s. In a December 1931 memo from Colonel Jason Joy to Will Hays, specifically citing Joy’s concern over the upcoming release of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, Joy expresses a personal revulsion for the horror genre, particularly Dracula, Frankenstein, and the then soon-to-be-released Island of Lost Souls. Joy closes his memo by asking, “Is this the beginning of a cycle that ought to be retarded or killed?” (qtd. in Smith 1). Joy’s language, as Smith points out, reflects “eugenic interpretations of individual bodily interpretations as proof of internal, genetic aberrations” (2). This disease imagery echoes how many white, able-bodied Americans saw the physically, racially, and socially unfit and shows how horror films became a new means of enfreakment.

Many early horror films featured monsters that were not only uncanny and diseased, but were also fabricated. As the 1920s went on, more and more horror films featured monsters whose hideousness resulted from accident, surgery, or violence. The end of the decade also saw the rise of what Stephen Asma calls accidental monsters—figures whose disruption of the natural order generated fear, whether intentionally monstrous, as in The Phantom of the Opera, or unintentionally so, as in The Man Who Laughs (1928). Their physical grotesqueness and uncanny nature came about against their will. In this sense, they were disempowered and denied agency. Consequently, these films’ terror reflected anxieties about normalcy by showing the ubiquitous potential for anyone to become monstrous. At the same time, films were starting to distinguish the disabled from the freak, so that by the 1930s, the constructed monster filled the cultural role traditionally reserved for the freak.

The “manufactured” freaks, moreover, came to be represented as creations of perverted science and mad scientists. In the 1920s, the primary setting of horror films moved from the circuses and sideshows of such films as The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (1920) to the secret laboratories and shadowy operating rooms that would dominate the horror films of the 1930s, as in Frankenstein (1931), The Invisible Man (1933), White

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9 For a much fuller discussion of the cultural roles of sideshows and lynchings, see Chapters 1 and 2.

10 Administrator of the Motion Picture Production Code.

11 President of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America.
Zombie (1932), and Murders in the Rue Morgue (1932), all of which featured monsters constructed by fringe scientists or deranged doctors practicing their own pseudoscience. As Smith notes, these films indicate a shift in popular-culture representations of eugenics (21); however, they also represent a definitive shift in the way American culture began to distinguish disability from freakishness. By the beginning of the Golden Age of Monster Movies (1931–1951), the movie monster would become the quintessential American freak.

**Everything Is Possible: Early Film and the New American Sideshow**

Immediately following its 1893 unveiling, the Kinetoscope quickly became a popular fixture in penny arcades across the country, and entire Kinetoscope viewing parlors began popping up in major cities.° Consisting of ten machines set up in two parallel rows of five, with each machine showing a different movie, the parlors operated much like a traditional ten-in-one freak show.° For a quarter, the same price as a ticket to a vaudeville show, viewers could watch all five machines in either row. Similarly, the Vitascope soon became a popular attraction on midways, often set up alongside the cooch shows. A moderately inexpensive form of entertainment,° moving pictures quickly became a popular diversion for the masses, and as their popularity grew, interest in freak shows declined. By the end of the 1920s, movies enjoyed nationwide popularity and freak shows had virtually disappeared.

While motion pictures enjoyed almost immediate popularity, they also, almost as quickly, became the target of scorn by those who viewed them as common, grotesque, and immoral, just as freak shows had been viewed a generation earlier. While some of the criticisms leveled against motion pictures came from their association with arcades, amusement parks, and fairs, most of it had to do with their content. Early moving pictures had an air of exoticism, showing faraway locations and natural wonders as well as famous events, such as the coronations of both Edward VII and George V. Early moving pictures also showed parades, circus acts, and stage attractions from around the world as well as primitive cultures never before seen by most viewers. However, early films also presented the erotic, the taboo and the grotesque. Examples of films displaying the more controversial areas of human life include pornographic films, which first appeared in 1896. Moreover, William K.-L. Dickson’s The Gay Brothers (1895)° showed two gay men intimately dancing together. Perhaps most grotesque of all, Thomas Edison’s ten-minute film Electrocuting an Elephant (1903) showed in full detail the electrocution of Topsy, an elephant that had been a popular attraction at Coney Island.

Freak shows involve more than just offering a glimpse at the Other. In The Monster Show (2001), David Skal argues that “freak shows offer a glimpse of ourselves, recreated along strange physical or behavioral lines” (30), creating an environment in which “nothing is fixed and everything is possible” (30). Like sideshows, movies took ordinary people and put them in extraordinary situations that show a distorted form of

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° The first Kinetoscope parlor opened in New York City on April 14, 1894.
° A ten-in-one is a style of freak show in which the viewer pays one price to see all ten oddities.
° Adjusted for inflation, the $0.25 charged by Kinetoscope parlors and Vitascope screenings equates to $7 in 2015.
° This film, originally entitled The Dickson Experimental Sound Film, is also the first film to use sound; it was filmed in Thomas Edison’s laboratories.
reality. Movies, however, had the use of technologies and techniques that allowed them to distort reality in ways that sideshows could not. Because movies had new ways to challenge our notions of normalcy, they came to epitomize the freak show. For example, in Georges Méliès’ *The Four Troublesome Heads* (1898), Méliès himself takes his own head off four times, placing each head on a table next to the others, where they continue talking independent of one another. Eventually, a headless Méliès plays a banjo with all four heads singing along. The film ends with Méliès chasing away three of the heads before putting on the fourth head. By using an ordinary-looking man, Méliès draws a connection that allows the viewer to see a bit of himself in the subject, just as sideshows emphasized the humanity of their human oddities.

![Figure 5.1: A still from *The Four Impossible Heads* (1898).](image)

While sideshows had displayed both gaffed headless freaks and talking severed heads, this film’s use of multiple exposure extended the boundaries of the possible in a way that sideshows never could.

Early films, especially Kinetoscopes, became a different medium for bringing more traditional sideshow acts to the masses. For example, the first ten-film commercial program released by Edison to the viewing parlor in New York contained six films that showed sideshow attractions and/or taboo activities. The program contained routines by two different human contortionists, a strongman managed by Florenz Ziegfeld, a cockfight, a trapeze act, and a wrestling match, all of which were popular sideshow or midway attractions. Five of these six films focus on aberrant human bodies, while the sixth, the cockfight, not only shows a popular sideshow attraction, but one that is both illegal in many states and commonly associated with a stereotypical redneck culture.

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16 Even though Méliès primarily worked in Paris, his films were equally distributed in both Paris and New York.
17 Gaffed freaks are freaks who did not come by their freakishness through birth or accident. Rather, they were normal-looking people who were dressed and altered to look freakish. The most famous example of this type of freak is William Henry Johnson, a dockworker from New Jersey who played the part of the original “What Is It?” at P. T. Barnum’s dime museum.
18 Multiple exposure is the superimposition of two or more exposures to create a single image. This film marks the first known use of that technique in a motion picture.
Another film featured a Highland dance routine bearing similarity to the type performed in the ethnic villages commonly seen on midways at the end of the nineteenth century. The remaining three films showed three different parts of rural life, respectively depicting a horse being shoed and taking the viewer inside a barber shop and a blacksmith shop. Transporting the midway from a local fairground to a viewing parlor on Broadway, the moving picture provided new venues for the freakish, one in which the viewer could gaze upon the freakish without having to physically encounter it.

Freaks also populated early narrative film, falling into three distinct categories of freaks: the criminal, the racial Other, and the beggar. While beggars, in the light of the Great Depression and Chaplin’s Little Tramp, eventually lost much of their freak status, the criminal and the racial Other both evolved as freaks and helped movies become Early-Twentieth-Century America’s preeminent sideshow, as well as transforming the way America would define the freak by the end of 1920s.

**Thieving Hands and Black Faces: Race, Freakishness, and Early Film**

One of the predominant images of the deformed in early film is the criminal. Throughout the first two decades of the twentieth century, films traditionally enfreaked physically aberrant characters, especially male characters, by portraying them as inherently criminal due to their deformity. A primary example of early film linking disability to criminality can be found in the 1908 short *The Thieving Hand*. The film tells the story of a destitute one-armed man who obtains a prosthetic arm from a store that specializes in selling artificial limbs. Unfortunately, the limb has a mind and the ability to move on its own, as well as tendencies toward kleptomania. After receiving the arm, the man becomes a thief against his will and begins picking the pockets of everyone he encounters and then using his other arm to return to the stolen items to their rightful owners. Distraught over the arm’s criminal impulses, he sells it to a pawnshop, where it is placed in the window display. The arm, however, has plans of its own and, after stealing all of the jewelry in the case, returns to the one-armed man and reattaches itself to him. Police officers immediately apprehend the man, arrest him for theft, and throw him into a prison cell as the movie ends.
The film’s criminalization of disability lies primarily in its portrayal of the arm itself as an incorrigible kleptomaniac, thereby placing the criminal nature in the prosthetic body part itself. Furthermore, the arm presents the man with a way to mask his disability, to masquerade as physically normal. This ability lies at the heart of the prosthetic’s criminal nature. Stealing from everyone he encounters and then returning the stolen items immediately, the man shows himself as a criminal the entire time he is wearing the arm. Forcing him to trade being a cripple for being a thief, the arm converts the man from one sort of outsider to another, suggesting that his true crime is trying to hide his freakishness. The return of the arm suggests that the arm and the man belong together, that disability and criminality are inherently connected to each other. Middle-class passersby ignore the disfigured man at the beginning of the film, and his imprisonment at the end of the film removes him from society. Locked away, the man shares the fate of many “undesirable” Americans who violated the Ugly Laws.\textsuperscript{19}

The film’s comic tone, moreover, creates a sideshow atmosphere. A comic figure, the man is reduced to an object of derision at whom the audience can laugh without guilt, so that the film ends “happily” with the freak purged and society restored. In this way, the film both depicts the disabled as a threat that is easily identified and neutralized and allows the audience to feel the same sense of superiority that freak shows did.

During the 1920s, the nature of films with characters who had prosthetic and amputated body parts would change dramatically. For example, \textit{The Hands of Orlac} (1924), in which a pianist has his hands amputated and replaced with those of a criminal, connects disfigurement with murder—a much more serious crime than the pickpocketing in \textit{The Thieving Hand}. Moreover, the disfigured character is no longer an object of laughter; rather, he is a monster. This shift of the freak to the monstrous is particularly present in the films of Lon Chaney. Chaney was the highest-grossing star of the 1920s; he starred in the highest-grossing film of the year twice\textsuperscript{20} and was the first true horror film

\textsuperscript{19} For a more extended discussion of the Ugly Laws, see Chapter 4.

\textsuperscript{20} Chaney starred in \textit{The Hunchback of Notre Dame} (1923) and \textit{The Phantom of the Opera} (1925), each of which was the highest-grossing film of its respective year. In addition, \textit{The Penalty} (1920), The
star. Throughout the 1920s, Chaney made a series of films, including *The Penalty* (1920), *The Unknown* (1927), *West of Zanzibar* (1928), and most famously, *The Phantom of the Opera* (1925), in which disfigurement naturally led to criminality. Through grotesque contortions of his body and makeup that earned him the nickname “The Man of 1,000 Faces,” Chaney routinely played characters who became murderers after they became disfigured. Moreover, Chaney’s characters evolved over the course of the 1920s from characters who were disfigured but otherwise human at the start of the decade, such as his character in *The Penalty*, to full-fledged monsters, such as the vampire he plays in *London after Midnight* (1927).

![Figure 5.3: Lon Chaney in (top) The Penalty and (bottom) London after Midnight.](image)

The image of the criminalized freak also often combined with a second trope of freakishness: the racial Other. While many directors used blackface and minstrel-show stereotypes to enfreak African Americans, no director used film as a showcase for racial freakishness more frequently or more effectively than D. W. Griffith. Griffith’s enfreakment of non-whites began in his early short films. In *The Battle at Elderbush Gulch* (1913), for example, Griffith stereotypes Native Americans, prominently using...
headdresses, tomahawks, and tribal dancing. The Native Americans’ tribe is not named, thereby suggesting that all Native Americans were alike and were consistently oddities. Griffith also fabricated characteristics, showing the Native Americans eating dog as part of a tribal religious festival. In the film, the Native Americans thus replicate the primal mannerisms on display in the Indian Villages commonly found on fair midways.

Griffith also portrays Native Americans as an innately violent threat to whiteness when, at the end of the film, he casts all of them as bloodthirsty savages besieging a log cabin, intent on killing the white family inside. This faceless mob of Native Americans echoes those in sideshows and Wild West shows, especially the one run by Buffalo Bill Cody. Like the criminalized freak, the racial freak would also evolve during the 1920s from being a humanized threat to being a monstrous one. The film, however, that paved the way for this shift was Griffith’s tour-de-force epic, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915).

While not a horror film and devoid of monsters, *The Birth of a Nation* establishes visual cues and scenes that would characterize future horror films. The film uses sloppy blackface and garish clothing to make African Americans look grotesque and place them on the border between humans and beasts. The result is characters like “White Armed Joe” (uncredited) and Lydia—a mulatto housekeeper (Mary Alden)—who truly resemble freaks. Joe is literally half-black and half-white, a bit of a racial version of a hermaphrodite, and Lydia appears to be half-leopard and half-woman, prefiguring the monstrous cat women, such as *Cat People’s* (1942) Irena Dubrovna Reed (Simone Simon), who kill without conscience. While examples such as Lydia and “White Armed Joe” exist throughout the film, one scene in particular vividly illustrates *Birth’s* role in providing a freak show that paves the way for another shift in the definition of the American freak.

![Figure 5.4: “White Armed Joe” (right) in *The Birth of a Nation*.](image)

Two-thirds of the way into the film, Gus, a “Renegade Negro” (Walter Long), proposes to Flora Cameron, the “Pet Sister” (Mae Marsh) of the leader of the “Invisible Empire.” Rather than submit to the indignity of miscegenation, Flora strikes Gus and runs in terror through the forest with Gus chasing behind. When she reaches a cliff, Flora threatens to jump should Gus come any closer. Unable to control his lust, Gus slinks

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21 The group in the film that is clearly meant to represent the Ku Klux Klan.
toward her, and true to her word, Flora jumps, ultimately dying in her brother’s arms. Following Flora’s fatal leap, Gus scampers away on all fours, completing a transition from man to ape that has taken place over the course of the scene.

This scene bears a striking resemblance to an equally important scene in *King Kong* (1933). Kong pursues Ann (Fay Wray) through a jungle to the edge of a cliff. As Kong fights and defeats a pterodactyl, Ann considers her options. Kong looks up and sees Ann poised to jump, should he move any closer to her. After a moment’s pause he moves forward, only to see her jump into the sea below. Although Ann survives, the scene closely parallels the scene from *The Birth of a Nation* in its cinematography and editing as well as its content.

Unlike Gus, however, Kong, a freak of nature, is not even partially human, making the racially coded stereotypes, particularly Kong’s uncontrollable desire for white women, a radical extension of Gus’ racial freakishness. Kong’s formal enfreakment is complete when, following his capture by Carl Denham (Robert Armstrong), he is bound in chains and displayed in New York as a freak show attraction. As Kong roars and tugs at his chains, the audience screams at the monster and adjusts their monocles and opera glasses to get a better view of the freak.

As long as Kong is on Skull Island or bound in chains, the white characters in the film see him as a spectacle, something that must be seen to be believed. Conversely, once he breaks free of his chains and wreaks havoc on New York City, he becomes a threat that must be removed. Rampaging through Times Square, the symbolic heart of civilization, Kong has invaded society. He is somewhere he does not belong, and the only solution that the social and civic leaders can imagine is to kill him. While the final scene of the movie follows and furthers many monster film tropes, it also represents the way those who were deemed freaks, racial and otherwise, were treated in Turn-of-the-Century American literature, film, and culture. The racial stereotypes used by Griffith in *The Birth of a Nation* and by Merian C. Cooper in *King Kong* unify the American freak and the American monster.

**Grotesque Obscenity: Tod Browning and the Creation of *Freaks***
Following the explosive popularity of *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* in 1931, *Variety* published an article noting that Universal had the burgeoning horror market all to itself and that other studios were searching for horror tales to bring to the screen. MGM producer Irving Thalberg, intending to corner the horror market, signed *Dracula* director Tod Browning to a lucrative multi-picture deal. Thalberg initially commissioned Browning to make the first picture of his new deal, a big-budget adaptation of the novel *Arsène Lupin*, a project that would have united the Barrymore brothers for the first time (Skal, *Dark Carnival* 158). Unenthusiastic about the idea, Browning told Thalberg that he instead wanted to develop Tod Robbins’ short story “Spurs,” a story about a French circus dwarf who brutally avenges himself against the bareback rider he marries and her lover after they humiliate him at their wedding feast. Browning, originally envisioning it as a project for Lon Chaney,22 had convinced the studio to purchase the story’s rights in 1927. Initially squeamish about the idea, Thalberg eventually agreed to Browning’s

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22 Unfortunately, Chaney would never get the chance to star in the film; he died in 1930 of lung cancer.
request and paired him with Willis Goldbeck and Elliot Clawson to turn the story into a workable screenplay. Thalberg then called Goldbeck into his office to assign him the task of creating a “horror story more horrible than all the rest” (Skal, Audio commentary). After reading the finished script, now renamed *Freaks*, Thalberg reportedly put his head down on his desk and sighed, “Well, I asked for something horrible, and I got it” (Skal, Audio commentary). He had been given the script to what would become one of the most infamous films of all time—a film that would also serve as a watershed in how Americans would define the freak.

Taking place in a European traveling circus, *Freaks* details the lives and loves of a variety of human oddities and sideshow attractions. The primary story focuses on Hans (Harry Earles), a midget who is engaged to Frieda (Daisy Earles), who is also a midget. Hans, however, is actually in love with Cleopatra (Olga Baclanova), a trapeze artist whom he calls “the most beautiful big woman [he has] ever seen.” Initially amused by his affections, Cleopatra and her lover, the strongman Hercules (Henry Victor), laugh at Hans behind his back, while she pretends to return Hans’ affections and accepts his lavish gifts. Upon learning that Hans is the heir to a large estate, Cleopatra and Hercules conspire to have her marry Hans and then kill him by gradually poisoning him. Starting on their wedding night, Cleopatra begins their plot to kill him. At the wedding feast, she humiliates him by drunkenly and suggestively carrying on with Hercules and viciously insulting the other freaks. She then infantilizes Hans by carrying him home on her shoulder and putting him to bed. Learning that Cleopatra is poisoning Hans under the guise of giving him medicine, the other freaks reveal her treachery to Hans and hatch a plot. As the plan unfolds, Hans gets the bottle of poison and the other freaks exact horrific revenge on Hercules and Cleopatra. Hercules is killed and Cleopatra is turned into a grotesque human–duck hybrid. In addition to the central love/revenge plot, the film exhibited the daily lives and romantic escapades of a variety of other human oddities. These roles were played by actual sideshow freaks who played themselves, did their usual acts, and used their real-life stage names in the film. The freaks featured in the film included the conjoined twins Daisy and Violet Hilton; Johnny Eck, the Half Boy; and Prince Randian, the Living Torso.

Ultimately, Browning’s finished film bore little resemblance to Robbins’ story. In the final screenplay, Browning had changed the character names, replaced all of the circus acts except for the dwarf, removed the dwarf’s sadistic streak, and inverted the main characters’ relationship to one another. All that would remain of the original story was the core idea of a dwarf falling in love with and marrying a “big woman” and the central premise of the wedding-feast scene. Instead, Browning created a script that, according to former sideshow performer Johnny Meah, gave the audience the “backstage view of what was happening . . . and the grubbiness of the industry” (*Sideshow Cinema*). As *Time* would proclaim, Browning populated his film with “more misfits of humanity than has ever been gathered together in the combined shows of Ringling Brothers and

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23 Scholars and critics have often mistakenly referred to Cleopatra as part chicken. However, all of Browning’s notes and public comments clearly state that he saw the costume as half-duck.

24 Other sideshow acts receiving significant screen time in the film include Frances O’Connor, the Armless Girl; Peter Robinson, the Human Skeleton; Josephine Joseph, the Half Woman–Half Man; Olga Roderick, the Bearded Lady; and Schlitzie, Elvira Snow, and Jenny Lee Snow, a group of “pinheads.”
Barnum and Bailey” (qtd. in Skal, *Dark Carnival* 17). As the prologue added to the film by the studio proclaimed, *Freaks* was “the most startling horror story of the ABNORMAL and the UNWANTED.” Unfortunately, *Freaks* was also a film destined to become an immediate commercial and critical failure.

Upon its release, *Freaks* was widely attacked and the center of significant controversy. It was butchered and even banned by state censor boards and panned by critics, who called it “loathsome, obscene, grotesque and bizarre” (qtd. in Skal, *Dark Carnival* 178). It also bombed at the box office. Critics and organizations nationwide called the film an example of America’s falling moral standards, ultimately leading to a boycott headed by the National Association of Women (Skal, *Dark Carnival* 182). MGM was even threatened with a lawsuit brought about by a woman who claimed that seeing the film had shocked her into a miscarriage (Skal, Audio commentary). After less than two months, the studio decided that enough was enough and pulled the film, releasing the much lighter *Polly of the Circus* to replace it at the box office. *Freaks* also ruined Browning’s reputation and his career. He never directed a financially successful film again and retired permanently in 1939.

The critical and commercial failure of *Freaks* suggests that by 1932, the carnival sideshow no longer had the social currency that it had enjoyed from the 1880s through the 1920s. Whereas Browning had previously and to great acclaim directed successful films set in circuses and focusing on sideshow freaks, the criticism of *Freaks* suggests that society’s views of freakishness and what made someone a freak had shifted toward the monstrous. The film and the vitriol leveled against it suggest that motion pictures had finally supplanted the sideshow and that America’s vision of the freak had become far more monstrous.

**A Skilled Surgeon: Medicalized Deformity and *Freaks***

*Freaks* was not Browning’s first film featuring deformed characters, his first film set in a circus or sideshow, or his first horror film. The majority of his work over the previous twelve years had contained at least one of these three elements. Although Browning’s earlier films dealing with deformity were frequently and viciously attacked by critics, several of them are highly regarded by critics today, and none of them even approached the disaster that accompanied *Freaks* upon its release. The *New York Daily Mirror*, for example, labeled *The Unknown* (1927) the sort of thing that would appeal only to

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25 This statement by the reviewer, while probably intended in a hyperbolic manner, is at least partially true. According to David Skal in the DVD’s audio commentary on the film, the circus in *Freaks* would have been the largest traveling sideshow ever created and would have contained by far the largest number of famous, top-drawing freaks ever assembled for one show.

26 While the film did reasonably well in such smaller markets as Cincinnati and St. Paul, it bombed in New York, Chicago, and San Francisco, and did not even play in Los Angeles.

27 MGM had originally announced Browning as the director for *Polly of the Circus* in 1926.

28 While all of his films after *Freaks* failed at the box office at the time of their release, *The Devil Doll* (1936) is now highly regarded among horror film enthusiasts.

29 *The Unknown* focuses on a fugitive (Lon Chaney) who hides in the circus and poses as an armless knife-thrower and marksman who performs under the name of Alonzo the Armless. The bulk of the film focuses on Alonzo’s obsession with Nanon (Joan Crawford), the Ringmaster’s daughter, who cannot stand to be touched by men. Over the course of the film, Alonzo’s obsession grows to the point that he not only attempts to kill his rival suitor Malabar (Norman Kerry), but also has his own arms surgically removed, only to find himself rejected when Nanon overcomes her revulsion toward men’s hands.
people who “like to tear butterflies apart and see sausage made” and described the film as “spiced with cannibalism and flavored with The Spanish Inquisition” (qtd. in Skal, Dark Carnival 115). Similarly, Harrison’s Reports described it as appealing solely to a “moral pervert” and likened Chaney’s acting in it to “the work of a skilled surgeon in ripping open the abdomen of a patient” (qtd. in Dark Carnival 115).

Whether condemned or celebrated, Browning’s previous films dealing with the grotesque and the macabre all made money. Throughout the heart of his career (1920–1931), Browning routinely had both the studio’s highest-grossing film and its most profitable film of the year. Dracula, moreover, was the cinematic smash of 1931, having received wide critical acclaim, with Lugosi’s performance universally lauded, and having dominated the box office for much of the year. Browning’s popularity with moviegoers was so high that the Sun cited it as proof that “the good old days of the Roman Empire are upon us” (qtd. in Dark Carnival 115). The explicit connection drawn between Browning’s films and the deformity and sanguineous entertainment of Ancient Rome clearly paints them as freak shows in their own right. The popularity of both The Unknown and Dracula paired with the financial disaster of Freaks shows that the public’s taste for sideshows had shifted from the carnival to the cinema and that sideshows, even cinematic ones, had lost their niche in American culture. Moreover, the nature of the freak had shifted from the congenitally disabled freaks of sideshows to the manufactured but human fiends of films like The Unknown to the supernatural monsters of films like Dracula.

Freaks was hardly Browning’s first foray into films with grotesque and hideous characters. From Phroso in West of Zanzibar (1928) to Professor Burke in London after Midnight (1927), Browning often focused on aberrant bodies. Browning frequently set films in carnivals and circuses and had even directed The Show (1927), which took place in a freak show, to box office success. While America retained its taste for circus films following The Show, those films tended to be lighter in tone, as seen in such movies as Charlie Chaplin’s The Circus (1928). However, there are further differences between Freaks and Browning’s previous films that illustrate that there’s more behind the change in what drew at the box office than a simple shift in taste. Rather, these differences indicate a cultural shift in what it meant to be disabled versus what it meant to be enfreaked.

One of the primary differences between Browning’s earlier work and Freaks is the use of gaffed freaks instead of natural ones. As Skal points out in The Sideshow Cinema, “there had been frightening characters during the Silent Era, but no physical anomalies appearing on screen.” Instead, Browning manufactured the deformed characters in his previous films through prosthetics, harnesses, makeup, and camera tricks. In The Unknown, for example, in order to appear to be armless, Lon Chaney used a special harness that pinned his arms behind his back (and was so painful that he could

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30 While Browning is now most famous for his films dealing with the grotesque, those films represent only a fraction of his total output as a director. Over the course of his career, Browning directed films in multiple genres, including romantic dramas, crime films, and comedies. Examples of some of Browning’s most acclaimed films that do not deal with the grotesque include Iron Man (1931), Outside the Law (1920), White Tiger (1923), and The Thirteenth Chair (1929).
wear it for only a few minutes at a time). While moviegoers may not necessarily have been able to figure out how the illusion worked, they knew that Chaney’s armlessness was a ruse. By contrast, *Freaks* contains only one gaffed performer: Elizabeth Green, the Bird Girl, who has no significant dialogue or screen time.

MGM clearly understood the value of gaffing freaks, as seen in a publicity piece submitted by Goldbeck to *Motion Picture Classic* entitled “The Most Grotesque Moment of My Life” that when published (as was then common practice for such magazines) was falsely presented both as a true story and as authored by Chaney himself. In the article, half a dozen freaks with particularly gruesome deformities visit Chaney and offer him the honor of becoming their honorary king in tribute to his portrayal of disfigured characters on screen (Skal, *Dark Carnival* 165). That response to this piece reveals that for many Americans, Chaney’s portrayal of his characters had made him the prototypical American freak, suggesting that on Fiedler’s continuum the American freak was shifting away from the disabled and toward the monstrous.

Further, Browning’s enfreaked characters were often gaffed within the world of the film itself, as in *The Show*, which focuses on The Palace of Illusions, a freak show run by Cock Robin (John Gilbert) and featuring such acts as Arachnida, the Human Spider (Edna Tichenor), and Neptuna, the Mermaid Queen (Betty Boyd). In addition, the show includes a dramatic presentation that features Salome dancing the Dance of the Seven Veils in exchange for the severed head of John the Baptist and ends with the severed head declaring its love for Salome. Thus, not only are the sideshow acts played in the film by able-bodied actors, but they are also ruses within the film itself. The film itself is no more legitimate and exploitative of actual disability and deformity than the dramatization about Salome presented within it. Rather than identify with the freakish characters, as was often the case at sideshows, viewers here identify with the freak show audience in the film. As a result, the viewer’s emotional response parallels that of the spectators within the film and, consequently, places them in the same position they enjoyed at freak shows.

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31 For much more on the tricks Chaney used through makeup and other artificial means to create his grotesque characters, see Bret Wood’s documentaries *Lon Chaney: Behind the Mask* (1996) and *Kingdom of Shadows: The Rise of the Horror Film* (1998). For further information on Chaney’s career, see Blake.

32 One of many fan magazines that arose during the 1920s and 1930s.

33 One of the most grotesque freaks to visit Chaney was a veteran with half of his face blown away.
Figure 5.5: Cock Robin shows off Arachnida in *The Show* (1925).

Using as many real sideshow freaks as he could in *Freaks*, however, allowed Browning to “populate a film with physical deformities that Chaney would have never been able to approximate” (*Sideshow Cinema*). Because its actors have real disabilities, *Freaks* differs in several ways from Browning’s previous examinations of freakery, one of which is that it medicalizes its characters’ deformities. Instead of having its characters’ physical aberrations symbolize genetic inferiority or immorality, *Freaks* shows its characters’ disabilities as medical issues and neutralizes the stigma attached to them.

In electing to make *Freaks*, Browning resisted the trend toward monsters that had been gaining popularity. In presenting actual human oddities, Browning was drawing on the sideshows and dime museum displays that antedated moving pictures, even though these forms of entertainment had been vanishing from the American landscape over the previous decade. Audiences, however, did not view the human oddities with the sense of gleeful terror that had greeted Chaney’s creations throughout the 1920s, nor did they view them as spectacles of freakish entertainment. Instead, they saw the deformed bodies as markers of medical disfigurement. The *New York Times* pondered whether the film “should be shown at the Rialto . . . or in, say, the Medical Center” (“The Circus Sideshow” 7). Similarly, *Harrison’s Reports* described anyone who viewed the film as entertainment as belonging “in the pathological ward” (qtd. in Skal, *Dark Carnival* 209), while the *Hollywood Reporter* labeled the film “an unpleasant onslaught on the feelings, the stomachs, the brains, and the senses” (“*Freaks* Giving” 1). Such reviews seemed to be based on queasiness about disease and disability rather than on outright enfreakment. The difference here is essentially the same as the difference between a display in P. T. Barnum’s dime museum and one in the Mütter Museum.34

Moreover, the reviews expressing moral outrage on medical grounds reflect a much larger movement in American society to displace previously mythological perceptions of the disfigured and disabled with medically based understandings that engendered responses of pity and desire for a pathology-based understanding of their condition (Smith 94). Society was moving deformed bodies from public display to

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34 Located in Philadelphia, the Mütter Museum is one of America’s oldest and most highly respected medical museums. Its exhibits are intended for education rather than titillation.
medical institutions. As David Gerber points out, “the American freak show thus increasingly encountered an explicitly moral rejection premised on the medicalization of human differences”\textsuperscript{35} (45). \textit{Freaks} provides an example of the sort of medical curiosity burgeoning during this era in a scene that shows Daisy and Violet Hilton joking around with Phroso the Clown (Wallace Ford). Showing off one of the tricks the Hilton sisters were famous for, Phroso has Violet close her eyes before he pinches Daisy’s arm. Violet then correctly guesses what Phroso has just done. This scene echoes another in which Daisy reads a magazine while Violet is on a date. However, as soon as Violet and her date begin passionately kissing one another, Daisy puts down her magazine and gets a sultry look on her face, indicating that she is enjoying the kiss as much as Violet is. While Browning presents these scenes in a titillating manner in an effort to trigger rather lurid speculations as to what other physical sensations the twins jointly enjoy, the scenes also address what was a legitimate scientific question at the time. While the twins’ entwined neurological systems regularly raised bawdy speculations among the men they encountered, their neurological responses also raised legitimate medical-based interests from neurologists across the country\textsuperscript{36} (\textit{Bound by Flesh}). Much of the outrage surrounding the film labeled it as exploitative, cruel, and demeaning, suggesting that while some audience members may be have enjoyed an erotic charge from the twins’ sensory abilities, many more of them were disgusted by this sort of perversion.

In addition to becoming medical curiosities, the previously enfreaked also generated pity from many Americans. As opposed to the negative attitude toward wounded Civil War veterans, Americans’ attitude toward World War I amputees was far more sympathetic and full of admiration. This shift in how Americans viewed the disabled comes through in the criticism of \textit{Freaks}. Before \textit{Freaks} was released, studio executives were convinced that it would be a financial success because the story dealt with a “midget being punished for his unearned riches and aristocratic pretensions” (Adams 62). However, they failed to anticipate “the shocking effects of its disabled actors on viewers who had recently witnessed the wounded veterans of the First World War” (Garland-Thomson, \textit{Extraordinary Bodies} 64). Moreover, war films, especially those about World War I, were a staple of early 1930s cinema. Consequently, war wounds and even amputated body parts became an increasingly common sight, especially in the final years before the widespread enforcement of the Motion Picture Production Code. Far from being enfreaked, the amputees and otherwise disfigured characters in these films are treated with respect and dignity. For example, the 1930 Best Picture winner, \textit{All Quiet on the Western Front}, not only features multiple characters who become amputees, but also includes a particularly harrowing shot of a pair of severed hands clinging to a barbed-wire fence after a French soldier steps on a landmine. Films would continue to use such imagery of the disfigured into the 1940s, with the release of such films as \textit{Kings Row} (1942) and \textit{The Best Years of Our Lives} (1946). Such films medicalized many types of bodies that had previously been enfreaked, including some nearly identical to those on display in \textit{Freaks}.

\textsuperscript{35} For further examination of the increased moral outcry against freak shows, see Bogdan, \textit{Freak Show}; Fiedler; Adams; and Garland-Thomson, \textit{Extraordinary Bodies}.

\textsuperscript{36} The twins never publicly revealed just how much they simultaneously experienced physical sensations.
“Misfits of Humanity”: Humanizing Disfigurement
Despite the fact that according to Tod Robbins, *Freaks* is a film that is “painted in very broad strokes,” it still manages to “show the human side of what is presented at first glance as inhuman” (*Sideshow Cinema*). Throughout the film, Browning shows the freaks going about their everyday lives, but never performing for a crowd. Even when the best-known of the sideshow performers perform the most famous portion of their acts, such as Prince Randian lighting his own cigarette37 and Frances O’Connor eating and drinking with her feet, they do so as part of their ordinary lives. Consequently, the film strips away one of the layers attached to freak shows by placing the performers in a space where gazing at them feels more invasive than it would if they were in a sideshow tent or on a midway stage. This sort of voyeurism contrasts with staring at the grotesqueries in Browning’s other films in which the enfreaked characters, such as Alonzo or Count Dracula, exist only within the world of the film.

As in other horror films, *Freaks* uses its supposedly normal characters as guideposts for how the audience should react. Throughout the film, the normal characters38 do not react with any sort of shock or horror to the freaks simply living their backstage lives. In one scene, for example, Phroso interrupts talking to the seal trainer, Venus (Leila Hyams), when Johnny Eck approaches. At Phroso’s warm invitation, Johnny sits on the top step into Phroso’s trailer, making him roughly the same height as Venus, while Phroso demonstrates a trick that appears to reduce his own height. The result is that three characters are marked as performers who are conversing on equal terms. In another scene, Frieda and Venus converse about their problems with the men in their lives while Frieda hangs out her laundry. Earlier in the film, Browning draws parallels between the two couples by juxtaposing two scenes of the couples arguing with one another. Browning shows Venus arguing with Phroso about forgetting their date, then

37 At the time of filming, Prince Randian, the Living Torso, was one of the two or three most famous sideshow performers in the world. His most famous trick involved rolling and lighting his own cigarette despite having no arms or legs. While the scene in the film omits him rolling a cigarette, it does show him lighting one with a match.

38 For this chapter, when I refer to the film’s normal characters, I am referring to Cleopatra, Hercules, Venus, Phroso, and Madame Tetrallini.
immediately follows up with Hans complaining that he won’t be ordered about by Frieda when she asks him to not smoke such a big cigar. Frieda ends her conversation with Venus by lamenting how “we women are forced to carry all of the burdens,” thereby equating their respective problems with one another. By setting his film backstage, Browning shows how the sideshow could be “a great equalizer” (Sideshow Cinema). He therefore forces the viewer to connect with the freaks in the film on a more human level.

The impact of Browning’s humanizing his freakish characters can be seen in the virulent reaction to the film. In a scathing letter to Will Hays, Frances Diehl expressed her disgust that the studio would “stoop to the disgrace of making money out of hurt, disfigured and suffering humanity” (qtd. in Skal, Dark Carnival 176). Diehl’s disgust at the film was focused not on the grotesquery of many of the characters, but instead on their exploitation. This concern shows that, at least in this case, the film did not enfreak the human oddities in it. The studio responded to Diehl’s claims by releasing an ad that asked “Do we dare hold the mirror up to nature?” (177). The ad outlines some of the similarities between able-bodied Americans and the human oddities in the film: “[They have] the same passions, joys, sorrows, laughter as normal human beings” (177). In refuting Diehl, the studio here presents Freaks as a story about physically aberrant people who are all still people. These performers might have been freaks in an 1882 sideshow tent, but they no longer were in a 1932 movie theater.

Like Diehl, many of the scathing reviews of the film focused on its presentation of “the pitiful mistakes of nature” (178) and the “misfits of humanity” (180), while deriding the film as “unkind and brutal” (qtd. in Smith 94) and “cruel and exploitative” (Skal, Audio commentary). Although the language describing the freaks is far from complimentary toward them, it nevertheless humanizes them. By contrast, reviewers of Dracula referred to Dracula as “a pallid fiend” (qtd. in Skal, Dark Carnival 154) and a “Living Hypnotic Corpse” (156) and referred to the film itself as “a freak picture” that “must be accepted as a curiosity” (qtd. in Smith 83). Even trade insiders saw Dracula as a freak show, claiming that producers were asking themselves “whether nightmare pictures have box office pull, or whether Dracula is just a freak” (84). Clearly, between the two films, it is Dracula and its vampire that was viewed in freakish terms.

Further, considering how closely related exploitation and enfreakment are, the reviewers’ concern about Freaks wading into the realm of exploitation in itself suggests that they did not see the disabled actors as freaks. Whereas Americans had flocked to see Prince Randian perform his cigarette trick in carnivals and sideshows across the country, they recoiled at his doing that during a normal conversation. The difference involves seeing him as a freak, an object for their entertainment and derision, and as a human being with whom, despite his disfigurement, they have many similarities. Even if the film does “recreate rather than counteract the sideshow” (67), as Rachel Adams contends, the rejection of the film suggests that Americans themselves were now rejecting the sideshow.

Even the reactions of those most physically repulsed by Freaks and its cast help demonstrate how the film reflected Americans’ growing humanization of the physically aberrant. An example of a particularly volatile reaction to deformity can be found in an apocryphal story (told in slightly varied forms by nearly everybody who has written
about *Freaks*\(^{39}\) about F. Scott Fitzgerald, who was working as a screenwriter for MGM at the time: Fitzgerald was having lunch in the MGM commissary when Violet and Daisy Hilton sat directly across from him. As soon as he noticed the twins discussing what they were going to order, although only one of them was looking at a menu, he realized that they were conjoined. He then turned pea green and rushed outside to vomit. While Fitzgerald’s reaction clearly shows disgust, it also suggests an inability to reconcile the two attractive twenty-year-old girls with their deformity.

![Figure 5.7: Daisy and Violet Hilton (top) and Josephine Joseph (bottom) in *Freaks.*](image)

The film includes a scene with a similarly extreme reaction to one of the oddities. Hercules is discussing his problems with women with Daisy’s fiancé Roscoe (Roscoe Ates) when Josephine Joseph, the Half Woman–Half Man,\(^{40}\) walks up to them and looks at Hercules seductively before walking away. In the released version of the film, Roscoe says to Hercules, “I think she likes you, but he don’t,” in response to which Hercules bursts out laughing. Such a response implies sexual confusion on the parts of both Josephine and Hercules; however, it is Hercules’ excessive and seemingly forced laughter that suggests a deflection of potential homoerotic feelings. Therefore, Hercules’ discomfort cues the uneasiness that many reviewers reported in their reviews. This interpretation of Hercules’ sexually confused response gains further credence upon examination of the original dialogue that the studio ordered cut from the scene.

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\(^{39}\) To see examples of the variations in how the story is told, see Adams; Skal, *Monster Show*; and Smith, as well as the documentary *Bound by Flesh*. Fitzgerald supposedly included a reference to the incident in his short story “Crazy Sunday.”

\(^{40}\) There is much debate among sideshow and circus historians as to whether or not Josephine was a true hermaphrodite or simply a gaffed freak who presented himself as a woman on one half of his body and a man on the other half.
Originally, rather than Roscoe making a remark, Hercules says to Roscoe, “Every time I see it, I don’t know whether to hit him or kiss her.”

The cut dialogue also adds additional significance to a later scene where Hercules punches Josephine’s male half in the eye after catching him staring at Hercules and Cleopatra embracing, reacting as he would to any other man he caught spying on an intimate moment. Josephine isn’t assaulted here for being a transsexual or a freak; rather, he is punched for being a Peeping Tom. Not only does *Freaks* medicalize and humanize its human oddities, but it also normalizes them, while casting both Hercules and Cleopatra as the film’s monsters that must be expelled.

**“A Great Equalizer”: Inverting Normalcy and Enfreakment**

Scholars have discussed how *Freaks* normalized its deformed characters by showing their romantic and domestic lives.\(^{41}\) In the documentary *Tod Browning’s Freaks: The Sideshow Cinema* (2005), former sideshow performer Johnny Meah talks about how sideshows allowed all of their exhibits to earn enough money to purchase houses and live like normal people. As a result, according to Meah, “the sideshow was a great equalizer.”

Throughout *Freaks*, we see the freaks hanging laundry while gossiping, gathering to celebrate the birth of the Bearded Lady’s baby, passing out cigars, making out on a date, and following traditional courting protocol. About halfway through the film, for example, Violet becomes engaged while Daisy is also engaged to marry Roscoe, thereby triggering the viewer’s erotic curiosity. The film, however, takes its undercurrents of deviant sexuality and transposes them into something much closer to normal, a shift that is implicit in the posters that advertised the film. One poster, for example, raised speculation about the freaks’ sex lives, asking such questions as “Do the Siamese Twins Make Love?” coupled with an image of the twins with Violet’s fiancé. The tabloid-like poster resembles the scene mentioned above by simultaneously eroticizing the twins and suggesting the possibility that they have feelings and desires that the viewer probably would not associate with the disabled. While the notion of the twins both getting married initially raises images of four adults sharing a bed and enjoying a series of taboo sexual acts, those images are undercut by the two men meeting each other for the first time. Upon being introduced, the fiancés invite each other to come visit, just as any pair of middle-class future brothers-in-law would do when meeting each other for the first time. This joke, therefore, both mentally separates the wedding beds in the viewer’s mind and suggests a much more normal family relationship. By becoming engaged in a congenial, but complicated, relationship, the two couples more closely resemble other “normal” engaged couples than participants in lewd, freakish sexuality.

If the film certainly normalizes the twins through marriage, it normalizes other freaks through other forms of sexuality. For example, Elizabeth Green, the Bird Girl, confides to Frances O’Connor, the Armless Girl, that her fiancé has followed her from another town and that she anticipates trouble when her current lover finds out. She then shrugs her shoulders in a manner suggesting that she has been in similar scenarios before. In her dilemma of having two men on a string and being in danger of exposure, the Bird

\(^{41}\) For further discussion on the way the film domesticates the freaks, see Hawkins, *Cutting Edge*; M. Cook; and Adams.
Girl not only finds herself in a mess many viewers can relate to, but she also becomes an archetype that 1930s filmgoers would readily recognize.

In addition to normalizing the freaks through their sexuality, Browning also emphasizes their physical beauty by glamorizing them as if they were top-drawing Hollywood stars. While Browning emphasizes the beauty of some of the lesser stars of the film, such as in a scene with Frances O’Connor looking every bit the starlet as she sips wine with her foot, the film’s use of the actors’ beauty is most evident in the cases of Johnny and Frieda. Upon meeting Johnny Eck for the first time, Browning referred to him to a group of reporters as “the ideal Hollywood leading man” (Skal, Audio commentary), despite the fact that his body ended at the waist. Johnny consistently appears on camera well styled in half a tuxedo that highlights his good looks. Moreover, the camera consistently shows him either in close-up or positioned on chairs or steps in a way that makes him similar in height to the other actors in the scene. Prior to her role as Frieda, Daisy Earles had performed a vaudeville act under the stage name “The Midget Mae West” (Sidshow Cinema). Browning emphasized her bubbling sensuality by frequently dressing her character in outfits similar to those worn by West.

Conversely, the film de-sexualizes and thereby enfreaks Venus and Phroso’s relationship. Early in their relationship, Phroso leaves Venus’ trailer for the night. In the final cut42 of the scene, Phroso tells her to sleep well before exiting and saying, “You should’ve caught me before my operation,” seemingly revealing that he has been castrated or left impotent. As the scene was originally shot, Venus responded to Phroso wishing her a good night’s sleep by seductively telling him that “[s]ometimes a girl needs more than sleep,” and he replied with the line referenced above. This uncensored version of the exchange makes especially clear that the de-sexualization stems from his physical aberration. Phroso’s de-sexualization becomes even more evident upon Browning’s telling reporters that he named that character Phroso after Lon Chaney’s character in West of Zanzibar (Skal, Dark Carnival 123). Browning, therefore, connects Phroso’s character to a wheelchair-bound misfit referred to as “Dead-Legs.” In Freaks, Phroso is often shown in places, such as a bathtub, that allow the camera to show him only from the waist up. Repeatedly stripping him of the lower half of his body suggests that he is not a complete man. Browning also denies Venus any sort of sex life so long as she is with Phroso and remains faithful to him. Venus’ diminishing sexuality is made evident through her increasingly conservative dress. When we first see Venus, she is in her performance outfit, complete with very short, tight shorts and a low-cut tank top. At the end of the film, she wears a long coat that completely covers her and hides her curves. Although she and Phroso are affectionate, there are no romantic or lustful sparks outside of their kiss. Compared to the reconciliation of Hans and Frieda, who embrace in an implied renewal of their engagement, Venus and Phroso’s marriage is unconsummated, barren, and, to many, illegitimate.

While Browning normalizes the freaks by presenting Phroso and Venus’ relationship as ultimately sterile, he more directly contributes to the normalization process “through the systematic monstering . . . of the so-called normal characters” (M. Cook 51). Even though Hercules and Cleopatra both look like the eugenic ideal of

42 The version of the film that is released to theaters after it has been approved by all required standards and decency commissions.
the period, the film undercuts their physical beauty by turning them into scam artists and would-be thieves and murderers. According to Smith, “the dysgenic couple conspires to pervert the proper course of inheritance, marriage, and reproduction and to attack the circus’s former happy and healthy family” (88). Further, their cruel and underhanded behavior suggests that they are false representations of the mythic ideals associated with the names they have appropriated. While the viewer is “physically aligned with Cleopatra,” her actions throughout the film make that connection “uncomfortable” (Chivers 61). Although several critics disagree, I agree with Smith that the film “challenges ableist or prejudiced views of the freaks as monsters” (90). Hercules and Cleopatra’s villainous behavior casts them as the true outsiders, and they, not the human oddities, become the monsters who must be expelled.

Browning separates natural deformity and constructed freakishness by including scenes that question Hercules’ and Cleopatra’s respective masculinity and femininity. Hercules’ masculinity is challenged both in the scenes with Josephine Joseph and in an earlier scene, when Venus ends her relationship with him because of his boorish behavior. Despite Hercules boasting that he tells women when he’s finished with them, Venus continues packing. As she is heading out the door, Hercules complains that he gave her “all [his] time and money.” She responds, “Yeah, your time but my money.” Venus’ reminding him that she supported him casts Hercules as the woman in the relationship. Although Hercules is wearing his strongman costume, Venus is in control. At one point, Hercules flashes a knife with menace while cutting an apple. But the smallness of the paring knife diminishes rather than accentuates Hercules’ manhood. Originally, Hercules appeared in the final scene singing soprano in the same freak show where Cleopatra winds up on display, thereby completing the process of emasculation that he undergoes throughout the film.

Cleopatra’s feminine beauty is distorted through her interactions with Hans, during which her body appears increasingly monstrous, twisted in various contortions, especially when she is administering Hans’ poison. During these scenes, the combination of the camera angle and the low ceilings in Hans’ trailer makes her look grotesquely big and hunched over in a way that erases her usual curves. These presentations of Cleopatra as a controlling, manipulative monstrosity contrast sharply with an earlier scene with Hercules where she seductively opens her robe for him, as well as with the initial shot of her in the film, which shows her gracefully sitting on her trapeze in a leaned-back pose that highlights her legs and her breasts. Consequently, the shift in her appearance as we see her gradually fall from her status as the ideal of feminine beauty mirrors her eventual exposure as the film’s primary monster. The external revelation of her inner monstrosity enfreaks her by following the trope of many horror films, particularly films that show characters becoming werewolves, vampires, or otherwise physically altered monsters.

“Offend One and You Offend Them All”: Vengeance and Normalcy

The wedding feast formally establishes the freaks as normative and Cleopatra and Hercules as the outsiders. While it is certainly noteworthy that this scene is the one time that all of the freaks are together, it is those parties who are absent that is most important.

43 For examples of critics who disagree with the notion that the film ultimately normalizes the freaks, see Markotic; M. Cook; and Hawkins, Cutting Edge.
Originally, according to Skal, Browning had Alonzo the Armless,\(^{44}\) Lon Chaney’s character in *The Unknown*,\(^{45}\) in attendance at the feast (Audio commentary). Because Alonzo was first a gaffed freak before intentionally enfreaking himself through elective surgery, his attendance at the feast would have changed the tenor of the scene. Throughout *The Unknown*, Alonzo uses his deformity as a means of getting away with manipulation, theft, and even murder. Moreover, Alonzo becomes a true armless freak after coercing a doctor into performing the surgery. Following his surgery, Alonzo truly becomes a monster: he becomes maniacally consumed with forcefully possessing Nanon (Joan Crawford), the object of his affection, even if it means killing her lover Malabar (Norman Kerry). Consequently, while he may be deformed and even a circus performer, Alonzo is not a freak in the sense that Browning presents them in *Freaks*. He is a monster, and any audience members who recognized him would have associated him as such. Alonzo’s presence at the wedding feast would have aligned the freaks with a monster and would therefore have cast the freaks, as opposed to the physically normal Cleopatra, as the monsters of the film.

Other notable absences from the wedding feast include Venus, Phroso, and Madame Tetrallini, the film’s supposedly normal but decidedly un-monstrous characters. Throughout the film, these characters prove themselves to be friendly toward the human oddities, with Venus and Phroso both decidedly treating them as equals. Their exclusion from the feast nevertheless establishes them as outsiders who, even as unthreatening friends, are not welcome at this particular ritual. In this scene, it is the deformed, not the able-bodied, who are the insider group. As for Cleopatra and Hercules, the two able-bodied characters present at the feast, the procession of the loving cup clearly establishes their outsider status. Cleopatra’s discomfort during this scene becomes evident as she finds herself the center of attention of a group of people whose bodies are all different from hers, and the constant chanting of the nonsensical phrase “gooble gobble” places her in a situation where she does not even speak the language. Once Angeleno (Angelo Rossito) begins dancing on the table with the loving cup, Browning constructs the scene as if he were directing a silent film, introducing it with the intertitle “The Wedding Feast,” thereby distinguishing the scene from the rest of the film. Moreover, there is little dialogue outside of the chanting, creating instead what Skal calls “picturesque silences” (Audio commentary) and forcing the audience to focus on each of the freaks. Browning then applies other techniques commonly used in silent films, including disorienting angles and close-ups on individual freaks, making the scene confusing and uncomfortable for both Cleopatra and the audience. The alternating between the freaks at their most grotesque and Cleopatra’s terrified face physically and emotionally connects them, thus exposing the tenuous line between freak and normal.

Cleopatra, however, is enfreaked not by the freaks’ offer to include her in their community, but rather by her insulting and vulgar behavior toward them and their offer.

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\(^{44}\) The actor who would have replaced Lon Chaney in the role remains unknown.

\(^{45}\) *The Unknown* focuses on a fugitive (Lon Chaney) who hides in the circus and poses as an armless knife-thrower and marksman who performs under the name of Alonzo the Armless. The bulk of the film focuses on Alonzo’s obsession with Nanon (Joan Crawford), the Ringmaster’s daughter, who cannot stand to be touched by men. Over the course of the film, Alonzo’s obsession grows to the point that he not only attempts to kill his rival suitor Malabar (Norman Kerry), but also has his own arms surgically removed, only to find himself rejected when Nanon overcomes her revulsion toward men’s hands.
By throwing champagne in Angeleno’s face and calling them “dirty, slimy freaks,” she reveals her inner ugliness. While her infantilization and mockery of Hans earlier in the film make him look foolish, in this scene that same treatment of Hans is paired with her verbal assault on the freaks as an entire community to make her look monstrous. She has clearly established who the audience should identify with and shown herself as unworthy of being part of the freaks’ community.

Many critics, however, do not see the wedding feast as the film’s turning point, but instead consider the turning point to be the moment that the freaks take revenge. For example, Méira Cook sees the freaks during the final scene as “an undifferentiated, amorphous mass of fragmented bodies and spare parts” (50), and Sally Chivers argues that the freaks are terrifying both because “they enact a murderous revenge on their attackers” (61), and because “they refuse to remain trapped in a body image that suggests their activities should be restricted or curtailed” (61). The conclusion, however, could be read equally as the freaks demonstrating their normalization, and as reflective of the slow but sure integration of disabled bodies into American culture, for the freaks are responding to threats just as the hero does in most early horror movies, acting to permanently remove the monster from their midst. They thus become the insider group protecting itself from the dangerous outsider. In short, they take on the role usually reserved in early horror films for white, able-bodied, male characters by exerting the agency previously denied to aberrant bodies. Consequently, the revenge scenes normalize them as much as earlier scenes of them hanging laundry and celebrating the Bearded Lady’s new baby. Moreover, by attacking two characters who represent the physical ideal, outliers on the top end of the bell curve, they are attacking the impossible ideals established by Hollywood and aligning themselves with Venus and Phroso, who are not physically idealized. In this way, they are distinct from the deformed protagonists of Browning’s earlier films.
At the end of the film, we see the result of the freaks’ revenge: Cleopatra has undergone xenotransplantation and been turned into a half-woman, half-duck abomination. While she is now displayed in a freak show full of bodies that the Barker refers to as “twisted and deformed,” she has been transformed not just into a freak, but into a monster as well. Following the freaks’ revenge, her grotesque body now bears the characteristics of the monster previously discussed. First, she has gone from being not only an able-bodied, but a physically ideal, woman to being what Asma calls “an accidental monster” (11). Her deformity has been specifically constructed, resulting not in her becoming medically disfigured, but instead in her having become a manufactured monstrousity. In fact, during the Barker’s speech that leads up to the spectators’ seeing Cleopatra, Browning removed references to the exhibits as “mistakes of nature,” while leaving in the reference to them as “living, breathing monstrosities,” suggesting that he wants us to see Cleopatra not just as a freak, but as a freak whose monstrosity renders her distinct from the other freaks we’ve met earlier in the film. However, it is important to note that Cleopatra is not a gaffed freak. Indeed, as Mary Russo points out in *The Female Grotesque*, the “realist

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46 Browning originally made the suit with the intention of putting Chaney in it as the ending to *West of Zanzibar*.
47 For a theory that Cleopatra actually is a hoax, see Adams.
terms of the film” make it “impossible for her to be read as carnivalesque or a hoax” (92). Moreover, because her newly constructed body is entirely living flesh, the film insists that she be viewed “as a real woman” (92). She is not a humbug, a ruse, or a sideshow scam; perverse as it may be, her body is authentic.

Because her body blends the familiar with the inconceivable, she triggers the anxieties in the viewer associated with Freud’s Uncanny. She has become a living obscenity, meeting Carroll’s definition of the impurity necessary to be truly monstrous. Half-human and half-duck, she has become “categorically interstitial” and “categorically contradictory” (Carroll 32). Her “unclean and disgusting” (21) body prompts sounds of repulsion from her spectators, suggesting that her ugliness and her incomprehensible body were equally responsible for the nausea and abject terror experienced by many viewers upon the film’s release.

The barker’s spiel48 makes clear, moreover, that the freak show Cleopatra has been placed in illustrates the shift from the disabled to truly monstrous. Far from being the “Peacock of the Air,” as she is dubbed in the beginning of the film, she is now the star attraction of a collection of “living, breathing monstrosities.” The barker’s use of the word “monstrosities” contrasts sharply with another early scene in the movie in which Madame Tetrallini defends several of the freaks from an angry game warden, telling him that they “are only children.” The barker’s use of the plural “monstrosities” suggests that Cleopatra is not the only monster on display and raises the potential, since it is the only word the barker uses to describe the exhibits, that all of the exhibits are monsters.

By contrast, the film’s coda shows Hans and Frieda reunited in a lavish house, in what we can fairly assume will become marriage. Despite their height, they look the very picture of normalcy. The contrast between their home and Cleopatra’s suggests that the medically and naturally deformed have assimilated into American life, whereas the truly monstrous must now remain on display. Further, it is significant that Cleopatra has been placed in a pit show,49 as opposed to a circus or a carnival ten-in-one. By exhibiting her in what is considered the lowliest of freak shows, the film marks Cleopatra as the epitome of both freakishness and monstrosity. Anyone who gazes at her will literally look down on her. Further, the walls around her exhibit contrast sharply with the traditional freedom of a stage used by sideshow exhibits displayed in circuses and on midways. Far from an entertainer, she is caged in and looked at only with disgust and pity. The monster has become the freak.

48 According to David Skal in the DVD’s audio commentary on the film, the barker is a stand-in for Browning himself.
49 A pit show is a type of sideshow that exists in a storefront and in which spectators walk along planks and peer down into pits at the various exhibits. The pits are usually sized and decorated in such a way as to maximize the exhibits’ grotesqueness.
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