

**THE DEVIANT BODY IN NEO-VICTORIAN LITERATURE:
A SOMATECHNICAL READING OF THE FREAK IN ROSIE GARLAND'S
THE PALACE OF CURIOSITIES (2013)**

LIN ELINOR PETTERSSON
University of Málaga
pettersson@uma.es

ABSTRACT. *The contemporary fascination with historical, social and literary representations of the deviant body calls for new understandings of corporeality that question the body as a purely biological entity, and invites readings of corporeality as culturally inflected. The present article explores neo-Victorian enfreakment through the lens of "somatechnics" reading "[e]mbodiment as the incarnation or materialisation of historically and culturally specific discourses and practises" (Sullivan and Murray 2014: 3). I will apply the concept of somatechnics to (neo-)Victorian enfreakment practises drawing on scholars as Bordo (1993), Grosz (1994), Sullivan and Murray (2014) who, among others, have challenged the binary split between the mind and body, and argued for the social construction of embodied subjectivities. Although the body's physical materiality is irreducible, the body is always invested, shaped and transformed by external forces, or "technologies of power" as denominated by Foucault (2003a). I seek to address the human exhibit in Rosie Garland's *The Palace of Curiosities* (2013) to examine neo-Victorian reinventions of the divergent body. With this objective in mind, I will analyse how the neo-Victorian mode interlocks the Victorian freak-show discourse with the reader perspective to bring subjective responses to corporeality, humanity and normativity to the forefront, and in doing so, turns an exploitative space as the freak show into a site of self-reliance, self-expression and even fulfilment.*

Keywords: Neo-Victorianism, body, Freak Show, somatechnics, stare embodied subjectivity, stare.

EL CUERPO ABERRANTE EN LA LITERATURA NEO-VICTORIANA: LA FIGURA DEL *FREAK* A TRAVÉS DE LA SOMATECNOLOGÍA EN *THE PALACE OF CURIOSITIES* (2013) DE ROSIE GARLAND

RESUMEN. *Este trabajo se centra en la representación, transformación e interpretación del cuerpo aberrante en la literatura neo-victoriana a través de un cuidado análisis de la figura del freak en la novela The Palace of Curiosities (2013) de Rosie Garland. Tomando como punto de partida los argumentos de críticos como Bordo (1993), Grosz (1994), Sullivan y Murray (2014) sobre la dimensión constructivista del cuerpo humano, pretendo demostrar que el concepto de "somatecnología" ofrece una valiosa herramienta crítica para el análisis de la materialización de conceptos sociales a través de sistemas de control denominadas "tecnologías de poder" por Foucault (2003a). Con este objetivo en mente, el presente artículo investiga las dimensiones socio-culturales en la formación del freak a través de una exploración de la relación intrínseca entre la subjetividad y la corporalidad. En este contexto, Garland logra convertir un espacio explotador y deshumanizante como el freak show en un ámbito de independencia y autosuficiencia. El resultado de este estudio sugiere que The Palace of Curiosities sintetiza los aspectos vocales, visuales y autorreflexión de la literatura neo-victoriana a través de la noción del lector/observador.*

Palabras clave: Neo-victorianismo, cuerpo, *Freak Show*, somatecnología, visión, subjetividad y corporalidad.

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Rosie Garland's *The Palace of Curiosities* (2013) is the most recent work among a set of novels that hark back to the nineteenth-century freak show, as for example, Barbara Chase-Riboud's *The Hottentot Venus: A Novel* (2003), Jane Sullivan's *Little People: A Novel* (2011) or Stacy Carlson's *Among the Wonderful* (2011), just to mention a few¹. While these novels mainly focus on female human exhibits and demonstrate concern for disabled people who suffered from dehumanising practices and exploitation in the past, they also provoke questions regarding the reader's own implication in the process of commodification and objectification of people with deviant corporeality. Authors who explore the Victorian freak show engage with recent scholarly debates that situate the body

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outside dualistic paradigms as well as with new critical perspectives on the freak that locate the disabled body beyond the scope of objectification. This paper seeks to address the underlying complexities of “embodied subjectivities” that lie at heart of neo-Victorian freak discourses by taking a closer look at the human individual behind the freak performer in *The Palace of Curiosities*. In an attempt to demonstrate the *somatechnical* dimension of enfreakment, I will synthesise three analogous tendencies in the twenty-first century: the cultural materialisation of the body, recent critical approaches to the freak and literary refigurations of human exhibits in neo-Victorian literature. Taking this as a starting point, I set out to disclose how Rosie Garland explores corporeality, identity and humanity in the context of freakery and for what reasons.

Since the 1990s, feminists have increasingly been paying attention to the body as the materialisation of ideologies and social practises. Bordo has highlighted how traditionally “the body is located (whether as a wild beast or a clockwork) on the nature side of a nature/culture divide. As such it is conceived as relatively historically unchanging in its most basic concepts, and unitary” (1993: 33). Similarly, Grosz has suggested in *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism* (1994) that “[n]ot being self-identical, the body must be seen as a series of processes of becoming, rather than as a fixed state of being” (12). In this volume, the critic invites for new readings of the body “through a range of disparate discourses and not simply restricted to naturalistic and scientific modes of explanation” without ignoring its somatic materiality (20-21). As a result, feminist challenges to the dualistic relationship between nature/culture and body/mind have opened up for readings of the social dimension of corporeality and its relevance to female identity, which Grosz denominates “[an] *embodied subjectivity of psychical corporeality*” (22).

Subsequently, twenty-first-century feminist and queer readings of embodiment are increasingly focusing on the body as a socially inflected entity with the aim to explore the intrinsic relationship between the soma (body) and *technés* or external forces (i.e. *dispositifs* and hard technologies). Since 2004 onwards, the term ‘somatechnics’ is increasingly being applied by scholars to describe “the chiasmatic interdependence of soma and *techné*: of bodily-being (or corporealities) as always already technologised, and technologies as always already enfleshed” (Sullivan and Murray 2014: 3). This new critical perspective allows for scholars to explore corporeality and embodied subjectivities from new angles, as the body is no longer perceived as pre-existing physical entity that hosts the mind. Conversely, as Katsouraki and Watt affirm, the body is “the incarnation or materialization of historically and culturally specific discourses and practices which are key modes

of critical inquiry within Somatechnics research” (2013: 4). In this regard, somatechnics is not limited to mechanical or digital technologies. Rather, bodies are perceived as regulated by social norms that define the materialisation of the body and its meaning, which Michel Foucault defines as “technologies of power” in his lectures on the abnormal between 1974-75 (2003a: 48).

Foucault’s notion of technology refers to hard technologies as well as “*technés* [as] the dynamic means in and through which corporealities are crafted, that is, continuously engendered in relation to others and to the world” (Sullivan and Murray 2014: 3). In this regard, I find it necessary to consider the somatechnical dimension of embodiment when looking into the processes of normalising bodies. A somatechnical interpretation of the Victorian freak show discloses it as a space where technologies of power are revealed through performative practices that present the deviant human body as abnormal. Tromp and Valerius point out that “to understand [the] process of enfreakment we must understand the social context in which it is defined” (2008: 4). Taken this, I suggest that two analogous facts should be taken into account when approaching the somatechnical dimension of enfreakment. First, the nineteenth century witnessed the development of a normalizing society. According to Foucault, technologies of power originated through a set of regulations and disciplines in the nineteenth century:

To say that power took possession of life under its care in the nineteenth century, or to say that power at least takes life under its care in the nineteenth century, is to say that it has, thanks to the play of technologies of discipline on the one hand and technologies of regulation on the other, succeeded in covering the whole surface that lies between the organic and the biological, between body and population. We are, then, in a power that has taken control of both the body and life or that has, if you like, taken control of life in general—with the body as one pole and the population as the other. (2003b: 253)

Foucault’s claim situates the ontological status of the body within a social constructivist paradigm that is regulated according to fixed parameters of normalcy and deviance. Secondly, and parallel to the buildup of a normalized society, traditional practises of exhibiting and scrutinizing the deviant human body consolidated into an organised entertainment business, namely, the freak show. Consequently, new modes of representation developed that drew on bourgeois understanding of the public/private ideology and gender norms. In turn, these had a major impact on the nineteenth-century consciousness (Tromp and Valerius 2008: 16).

The freak show discloses what Sullivan and Murray refer to as “the operations of power that shape corporealities and that are so naturalised as to be almost

invisible” (2014: 4) by putting the deviant human body on exhibit in a stylised representation that challenges enforced normalcy. The unexpected, strange and anomalous body of the freak performer invites for epistemological readings of corporeality, identity and normalcy. Tromp and Valerius claim that “multiple constructs of freakery threatened to undermine definitions of normalcy—a notion in relation to which freakery was structured” (2008: 1). In this sense, the freak show represents a social space where cultural practices of shaping the body and regulating normalcy become visible and the reciprocal relationship between normalcy and deviance become evident. Williams and Bendelow emphasise that “Foucault’s epistemological view of the body means that it effectively disappears as a material or biological entity” (1998: 35). Taken this, I propose that the freakish body on display represents a cultural product and stands as a materialisation of technologies of power and knowledge.

The freak show was undoubtedly an exploitative spectacle and the degree of volition and agency on behalf of the individuals on display is complicated to measure. Nonetheless, several critics have convincingly argued for the fact that this peculiar and abusive entertainment business provided one of the few spaces that granted disabled people a chance to provide for themselves. Bogdan’s pioneering work *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (1988) was the first to describe this kind of show as a stylised social act interpreting the human exhibit as an active performer in process of enfreakment. Since then, the field of freak studies has taken new directions and scholars as Kérchy, Zittlau, Tromp, Valerius and Craton, to mention a few, follow in the lines of Bogdan. For example, Kérchy and Zittlau have recently stressed the subjectivity of human exhibits affirming: “although Continental European freaks are introduced as products of ideologically-infiltrated representations, they also emerge as embodied subjects endowed with their own voice, view and subversive agency” (2012: 11). Thus, freak performers are generally perceived as subjects that may exert influence on the performance and consequently, manipulate the audience’s perception of their otherwise unintelligible bodies.

Neo-Victorian literature engages with this critical perspective on the freak show as contemporary authors recast this peculiar entertainment business as a space of self-reliance and self-expression. Rather than being a mere articulation of the voices of the previously silenced, authors who recur to neo-Victorianism are concerned with attributing freak characters with a voice of their own and ascribe them humanity and agency. Neo-Victorian freak-show narratives draw on three of the main tenets of this performative literary mode: they are intensely vocal (Davies: 2012), densely visual (Boehm-Schnickter and Gruss: 2011) and deeply self-reflective

(Heilmann and Llewellyn: 2010). Flanders argues that freak narratives are often used to explore modern alienation and ponders on the question whether freak characters in contemporary literature are “as cynically used by their authors as by P. T. Barnum: look at them, the books cry, look how odd, how different!” (2013: 3). Accordingly, writers do not merely apply the same modes of representation, rather, they depend upon them. Yet, I hope to demonstrate that authors retract the Victorian freak show with a specific purpose in mind through a discussion of Rosie Garland’s *The Palace of Curiosities* as it brings together the vocal, visual and self-reflexive aspects of neo-Victorian literature.

The Palace of Curiosities is set in Victorian London and the plot builds on the fates of the two freak-show performers Eve, “The Lion-Faced Woman”, and Abel, “The Flayed Man” and follows them on their quests to assert human identity. The novel focuses mainly on a two-year period between 1857-58 and by situating the plot before the publication of Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* (1859), Garland evades the Victorian discourse on missing links to instead focus on theatrical connotations of the freak show. The story unfolds in two separate narrative strands told in the first person, which converge in the middle of the novel when the characters are brought together in the same show. The author manipulates the reader perspective by playing with voice and focalisation in combination with magic realism. Moreover, Garland incorporates the freak performers’ voices to describe their individual experiences, which marks a stark contrast to the objectifying and dehumanising practices that lie at heart of the nineteenth-century freak imagery.

Eve’s story has partly been inspired by the fate of the Mexican human exhibit Julia Pastrana (1834-60) and her tragic fate is partly mirrored in the novel. Firstly, Pastrana suffered from a rare medical condition of abnormal hair growth termed Hypertrichosis. Similarly, Eve’s body and face is covered by hair and Garland links her extreme hirsutism to maternal imprinting. The novel opens with an incident at the circus where Eve’s pregnant mother inhales the breath of a lion that has attacked its tamer. The idea that excessive emotional stimuli on pregnant women could result in birth defects was common belief in nineteenth-century Britain and even defended by medical doctors. For instance, as several critics have pointed out, scientists declared Julia Pastrana’s exhibition in London, 1857, a public health risk as it endangered the unborn children of pregnant women (Gylseth and Toverud 2003: 47; Craton 2009: 1-2). Secondly, Eve’s husband, Joseph Arroner, promotes her in the same vein as Pastrana’s husband-manager Theodore Lent, who variously displayed her as “The Mexican Bear Woman”, “The Ugliest Woman in the World” and “The Ape Woman” both during her lifetime and after her death.

Then, he continued to showcase her embalmed body together with their mummified infant son. Craton denounces that

[t]his last phase of Pastrana's career reveals freak-show practice at it most troubling: the odd body is merely an object, deprived of will. Presented under the glass for the gaze of middle-class consumers, Pastrana entertains her audience and validates their normalcy without any voice in how her difference is perceived. (2009: 2)

Neo-Victorian fiction has from outset been specifically concerned with attributing marginalised people with a voice of their own. In an interview, Garland has admitted the novel's connection to Pastrana and expressed her intention to reimagine the freak performer's subjective response to her condition: "the sad story of Julia Pastrana got me started. I thought about what it might have been like if her life was not as tragic and she had some extent of agency" (Pettersson 2016: 210). Yet, as I will argue throughout this article, neo-Victorian freak-show narratives paradoxically depend on the very same Victorian freak discourse that authors wish to alter.

The Palace of Curiosities is partly a *Bildungsroman* which portrays Eve's maturation process from childhood into a young adult woman, and the discourse evolves around the formation and shaping of her physical deviance. Eve is forced to struggle against external forces that attempt to control and possess her body although she does not perceive her hairiness as grotesque herself. This is articulated through her imaginary friend Donkey-skin's voice. In her search for identity Eve journeys towards social acceptance and resists several attempts of turning her into what Bordo refers to as "the docile, regulated body practised at and habituated to the rules of cultural life" (Jaggar and Bordo 1992: 13). Taking into consideration how Eve suffers from her mother's constant shaving, her husband-manager's stylised freak performances of her body, the audience's response to her corporeality and the general social disapproval of her hairiness throughout the novel, we reach the conclusion that Eve's body is a locus of social control.

Since birth, Eve's mother attempts to control her abnormal physical state, and in doing so, she foments the feeling that her body is undesirable. In order to protect her daughter from seeing her own reflection, she prohibits mirrors. More importantly, her mother tries to fit her into the frame of normalcy by annihilating her difference by constant shaving or even seclusion from the public sphere. As Davis claims, normalcy is enforced through regulatory discourses that shape ideological perceptions of the body (1995: 2). Apparently, Eve mother's intention is to protect her daughter from humiliation and rejection: "I am making you beautiful, 'she snapped, and started to cry. I'm doing this because I love you"

(Garland 2013: 32). Her insistence on normalising Eve brings the question of who dictates the image of the socially accepted and what we perceive as the visually normal to the forefront. Contrary to her mother's viewpoint, Eve has still not internalised normative values and her inner dialogue with her invisible friend revolves around the idea of pursuing normalcy: "that night Donkey-Skin visited me as I undressed for sleep. 'Mama's made me pretty,' I sang, spinning in a circle to show off my nakedness. *Pretty?* She snorted. *She's made you ordinary.* Mama told me I am a real girl now. It must be true" (18). Eve's inner thoughts hint at the socio-cultural dimension of beauty as being an ideal rooted in sameness and normalcy. However, it also reveals that Eve does not perceive her physical difference as ugly and resists her mother's attempts of shaving her, mainly because she does not share the normative value of beauty and femininity that her mother supports. Consequently, Eve's mother represents a "power of technology" (Foucault 2003a: 48) that struggles to bring her corporeal deviance under control.

In an attempt to prove her mother wrong, Eve takes to the streets in her natural appearance. Her plan is to demonstrate that she can be accepted as a human being just like she is. In order to achieve this, she visits the zoo, because "what better place to prove I was no animal than here, where the dividing line was drawn so clearly? They were in cages, I was not" (Garland 2013: 20). However, contrary to what Eve expects, the crowd is incapable of seeing beyond her hairy body and find her "not decent" comparable to "a monkey" or "a dog" (21). The visitors at the zoo reject the idea of her being an equal human being and their disapproval culminates in a violent reaction to her deviant corporeality when a boy throws a stone at her. From this experience she learns that her physical appearance is an obstruction for social acceptance and realises that her mother's view is supported by the norm, which in Foucauldian terms represents "an element on the basis of which a certain exercise of power is founded and legitimized" (2003a: 50). Eve is constantly reminded of the necessity to reduce her extraordinary physical appearance to normalcy until Joseph Arroner starts courting her and gives her false hopes of being accepted as she is. Yet, his interest in her is purely pecuniary.

Joseph Arroner beguiles Eve into marriage and consequently brings both her body and financial earnings under conjugal control. His intention to turn her into a freak-show exhibit epitomises both the commodification and objectification of the female body. Eve is seduced into believing in the possibility of a romantic marriage while she is a mere asset in the eyes of her husband. Mr Arroner's male objectification and commodification of Eve culminates in conjugal rape, which combines domestic violence with his personal interest of making profit from her

body by breeding a freak of his own. By forcing himself upon her, he exerts physical and psychological violence over Eve and this assault stands as the ultimate exertion of dominance and control over her body “I am your husband. Look at you. Look at the wife I choose. An animal. Business made me do this. This is not what I want. This is work” (Garland 2013: 294). While depriving Eve of free will, the right to her own body and human dignity by displaying her as freak, he inflicts both physical and emotional damage on his wife when forcing himself upon her. Duncan notes that “the private home has historically been seen as a place where men have assumed their right to sexual intercourse” (1996: 130), and Mr Arroner exerts his spousal right to do with his wife as he pleases. This act of violence incites the ethical involvement of the reader as it envisions the husband’s right to his wife’s body and consent theories that mislay the blame on the victim. Marital rape problematises choice and consent in legal, moral and social dimensions and Eve holds a unique social position as marginalised and victimised by her husband-manager. The questions raised regarding her consent and volition parallels her situation as freak with her social position as wife.

Eve’s career as human exhibit begins at home in the drawing room which her husband turns into a freak show. She is instructed to remain seated with a book in her lap, be dressed in the latest fashion of upper-class ladies and to recite poetry by heart. At this stage, Eve enacts the theatrical script of her husband-manager and her predisposition to participate in the exploitation and spectacle of her body significantly calls into question the volition of the performer. Gerber emphasises that Victorian freak performers “were only normally free and actually had little, if any, choice in giving their consent to the social arrangements into which they were born” (1996: 40-41). Eve’s gradual transformation from a passive display to an active performer in the show is embedded in the inextricable freak-show dilemma of consent and exploitation.

Garland evokes the nineteenth-century freak discourse when Mr Arroner presents his wife for paying visitors. Bogdan has disclosed the social construction of freaks by drawing attention to the complexity in different modes of representation. He distinguishes the exotic mode and the aggrandized status as two popular strategies to enhance sensational and extraordinary traits of the human exhibit. Bogdan notes: “the exotic mode emphasised how different and, in most cases, how inferior the persons on exhibit were. The aggrandized mode reversed that by laying claim to the superiority of the freak” (1996: 29). As mentioned above, literary refigurations of the freak compel authors to reiterate the pejorative discourse they intend to criticise.

Garland introduces a slightly modified mode of representation as she combines exotic and aggrandised modes in the manner Mr Arroner exposes Eve. The following passage illustrates how Mr Arroner commences the act with highlighting Eve's animalistic features and exotic origin to frame her as the Lion-Faced Woman in order to "cast the exhibit as a strange creature" in the eyes of the audience (Bogdan 1990: 97). Next, he manipulates the spectators' perception of femininity and respectability to contradict his previous assertion that she is an animal by instead presenting her as a respectable and refined woman:

This unusual creature you see before you was brought into London at a great expense from the broad savannahs of Africa! From the establishment of a certain lady of such high position and royal connections that discretion does not permit me to elaborate further. (Garland 2013: 120)

In a truly aggrandized mode of representation, Mr Arroner endows Eve with "status-enhancing characteristics" (Bogdan 1990: 97). Moreover, the animalistic image of Eve in combination with the stylised speech that warrants her respectability, femininity and class superiority represent a contradictory and ambiguous identity.

The social constructivism of enfreakment comes to the fore as Mr Arroner merges the exotic and the refined into a single identity through a highly stylised and theatrical discourse. However, as Balsamo holds, "the body can never be constructed as a purely discursive entity. In a related sense, it can never be reduced to a pure materialistic object [...] The material and the discursive are mutually determining and non-exclusive" (1999: 278). While emphasis is placed on the materiality of the divergent body in the show, identity is constructed through discourse. The freakish body on display discloses the intricate relationship between the somatic materiality of the deviant body and the *technés* that shape it. In this regard, the somatechnical dimension of enfreakment testifies to how the ontological status of the body is intertwined with the *technés* and technologies that construct, transform and support a freak identity.

In the case of female freaks, the intersection of gender and ideology on the body is synthesised through a discourse of control. Grosz and Bordo have insisted on the body being a product of social control. Grosz affirms that "the body is indeed the privileged object of power's operations: powers produce the body as a determinate type, with particular features, skills and attributes" (1994: 149). Similarly, Bordo equates "[the] social construction of femininity as delicacy and domesticity" to Foucault's notion of "a socially trained, 'docile body'" that is regulated by technologies of powers (1993: 18). As stated earlier, the freak show is undeniably an objectifying and exploitative entertainment business that presents

human oddities as a spectacle. Freak identities are stylised through a rhetoric underpinned by conventions specifying that the body should be viewed according to dualisms as normal/abnormal, human/non-human, male/female. Hence, the freakish body serves as a site of coded imprinting. Therefore, I suggest that the freak-show discourse that surrounds the female human exhibit is also a technology of corporeal control that articulates normative polarities of women's uncontrollable bodies and controllable femininity. In this regard, enfreakment practices elucidate the body as a process of becoming.

In accordance with Bordo and Grosz, I propose that the theatrical mode of representation that Eve's husband-manager utilises stands as an attempt to subject her deviant femininity and uncontrollable body under control. Garland recurs to the well-established imagery of birds to represent female entrapment: "'You must be seated when they call.' He placed me on the chair, angling it sideways to the window so that I could not gaze upon the street. I faced the empty row of seats. [...] I felt like a bird of paradise, stuffed and mounted on a twig, a glass dome rammed down on my head" (2013: 118-19). Her passivity causes the viewers to mistake her for an automaton and Garland's reference to a mechanic doll evokes the idea of an inanimate dummy puppet which articulates the words of its master. As Davies notices, the use of ventriloquism metaphor in neo-Victorian novels spells out an "imbalance of power" which reveals the tension between having a voice and lacking agency (2012: 7). Although Eve's story is told in the first person, at this point of the novel she does not have a say in the manner she is presented. In other words, she has a voice, but no agency.

Eve's body remains a passive locus of control at this stage and Eve is reduced to an object of display. Hence, Garland conveys Eve's transformation into a human exhibit as something more than an aggrandized presentation of her extraordinary body. As can be seen in the following passage, the author evokes the Victorian freak-show discourse to demonstrate how Eve's husband-manager is in full control of her body:

With each afternoon my husband's description of me grew more and more outlandish until I was transformed into a creature I barely recognised: I became 'morally uplifting; the most prodigious creature examined by Europe's leading men of Science and Philosophy; offered to the general populace for the further edification and education of Mankind'. (Garland 2013: 123)

Garland draws attention to how self-perception is bound to the body by adding Eve's voice to the narrative. If self-perception is tied to the body, corporeal control implies a control of identity that has a negative effect upon embodied subjectivity. This comes to the fore in both the Victorian freak show and neo-

Victorian reinventions of the practice of exhibiting the anomalous human body. Stern sustains that Lent's mastery over Pastrana's body and identity transmitted the need to dominate and reduce threatening body images:

Pastrana's paradoxical body worked to articulate and to police the borders of femininity. It describes Pastrana both as an animal and young lady, both masculine and feminine, both foreign and utterly domestic [...] her body and its display [was used] to promote female docility, reticence, and modesty within the field of vision. (2008: 210-11)

The visual encounter in the freak show deeply invested with meaning and comprehends a pronounced curiosity to behold human oddities. As mentioned earlier, the current critical trend within freak studies is to approach the performer as a subject who actively contributes to the spectacle rather than being a passive object on display. Accordingly, the freak also occupies the position of an observer. Thereby, I propose that vision is equally, or even more, significant than gaining a voice to the freak performer's struggle to assert agency.

This visual and reflexive stance can be seen in Eve's inner thoughts, which are ventriloquized through her imaginary friend Donkey-Skin's voice: "*see how they struggle with pity, horror and amusement, she said. How terrified they would be if they looked into the mirror and saw you [...] you are what they fear they might truly be*" (Garland 2013: 123). While Donkey-Skin's voice "represents the lack of an independent authorial voice" (Davies 2012: 18), the passage is both an instant of self-reflectivity and a revelation of the self-reflective dynamics of looking at human exhibits. Importantly, the freak show is a social space where ordinary seeing fails, and the unexpected becomes the familiar. Adams argues that,

instead of assuring dis-identification, in which the spectator recognises her difference from the body onstage, the sideshow is more often a space of identification, in which the viewer projects her own most hidden and perverse fantasies onto the freak and discovers them mirrored back in the freak's gaze. (2001: 7-8)

In this context, Craton points out that "the experience of the bodily spectacle opens a dialogue about both the nature of physical difference and whatever validating aspect of normative ideology. [...] [The] audience [is] engaged in collective ideological negotiation" (2009: 36). Simultaneously as the observer inscribes cultural values on the strange body, the freak actor confutes the audience's perception of his or her corporeality as inferior. As Eve gains insight into the underlying power dynamics of the freak-show spectacle, she learns to manipulate the audience response to her body by engaging them in a visual dialogue.

In *Staring: How We Look* (2009), Garland-Thomson defines the stare as “an ocular response to what we don’t expect to see; [...] we stare when ordinary seeing fails, when we want to know more” (3). The critic elaborates her theory on the specific power dynamics and dialogic relationship that the stare implies. The subtitle hints at our dual position as simultaneously being observers and objects of observation; how we look at our surrounding and our own outer appearance. Taken this, I consider that the stare provides a feasible critical tool to examine the subjectivity and agency of freak performers. This specific mode of seeing acknowledges the agency of the human exhibit as an active contributor of the perception of his or her identity. Garland-Thomson distinguishes the stare for being “an encounter between a starrer and a staree [that] sets in motion an intrapersonal relationship [...] this intense visual engagement creates a circuit of communication and meaning-making. Staring becomes involvement, and being stared at demands response” (2009: 3). Consequently, the freak performer has the possibility to advert the gaze and engage the spectator in a negotiation of identity that subverts (mis)interpretations of human status. Garland-Thomson’s emphasis on the interactive structure that supports this specific mode of watching invites for a new approach to divergent corporeality as it situates disabled people within the scope of agency and subjectivity. In *The Palace of Curiosities*, Eve’s career as a human exhibit spans a transformation from a passive display to an active performer. She gradually gains insight into the theatricality of the freak show as well as the inherent power structures in different modes of looking, and consequently avows her own voice and agency.

Mr Arroner’s exposure of Eva as a scopophilic spectacle reduces her into the position of a titillating object for the male gaze. Moreover, reminiscent of Mulvey’s “to-be-looked-at-ness” (1989: 11), he conceives her as an erotic spectacle and stylises her figure as a female freak onto which the male gaze projects its fantasy. Obviously, this enhances the idea of the visual pleasure of the female body. Heilmann and Llewellyn’s examination of scopophilia in neo-Victorian literature acknowledges the “subversive potential of the gaze” (2010: 111) and the scholars make a strong case of the reader’s “complicity in the process of objectification and commodification” (114). Their study of *The Hottentot Venus*, a literary refiguration of Sara “Saartjie” Baartman (1789-1815), stresses “the inescapability of the objectifying gaze and its textual inscriptions” (2010: 120). Similarly, the female human exhibit is presented as an object of “prurient voyeurism” in *The Palace of Curiosities* (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 114). Notwithstanding, Eve is capable of evading the objectifying male gaze and defies Mr Arroner’s attempt to reduce her into a passive object of scopophilic desire by changing the script that has been

drawn up for her. Accordingly, this invites for a reading through an alternative mode of looking to the gaze.

Focalised through Abel, the only character in the novel who sees Eve as a woman, the reader is positioned in an angle that envisions her as an active agent. Consequently, the reader is presented with two ways of looking that foreground two ways of responding to the spectacle:

I see how modestly she endeavours to veil her downy breasts, for they are in danger of toppling out of the neckline of her dress. It is cut at Mr Arroner's insistence: 'To add a bit of piquancy,' as he puts it. A man at the front cries, 'Go on love, a bit more leg!' She smiles at the audience, her teeth clamped together, and declines to accommodate the request. There is a growing chorus of wolfish howls. 'Show us your knees!' [...] She promenades from right to left and back again, singing a pretty ballad about her true love, who is a dear sweet boy and surely will return to her at any moment. 'It's singing!' laughs one wag. 'Miaowing, more like!' pipes up another. [...] She pauses and stands with her fists on her hips, taping her foot, as though considering conundrum. Then she twirls her moustache and throws the crowd a wink [...] 'I'm your own, your very own puss' instead of 'your very own girl' [...] with a miaow or two for good measure. [...] The men who have hooted at her are now struck dumb. Then the laughter begins [...] as they celebrate her cleverness in bending the tune at her will. (Garland 2013: 203-04)

Eve adverts the audience's attention to her enactment in a true music-hall fashion using direct address, bodily gestures and knowingness, and, as a consequence, she converts the gaze into staring. This pinpoints the visual inquiry in the freak show as an interactive dialogue where the freak is involved in the conception of his or her identity. In this context, ordinary seeing fails and, what is more, the gaze is superseded by the stare. Here, the freak, or staree, enters into dialogue with the starrer, which consists in a visual negotiation that attributes the human exhibit on stage with agency. Eve resists subordination as she rejects her husband's script which frames her as a passive object for the male gaze. Conversely, she takes control of the spectacle by articulating her own voice and asserting agency on stage. As Garland-Thomson contends "this ocular gesture of dominance acts out the gendered asymmetries of patriarchy [...] [l]aden with sexual desire, predation, voyeurism, intimidation, and entitlement" (2009: 40). When Eve masters the stage and produces the spectacle herself she is in a face-to-face situation and addresses the audience through the communal vocabulary of the eyes, answering back to what they believe she is, means, or wants.

Voice, vision and subjectivity converge in Eve's performance as the gaze is replaced by the stare. Her appropriation of the stage pinpoints "[the] potentially artful and productive roles starees take in the active meaning making of staring" (Garland-Thomson 2009: 96). Significantly, the instance is seen through the eyes of Abel who observes how Eve makes parody of the audience's view of her as an animal through laughter and subsequently negotiates her humanity on the stage. Furthermore, Abel learns from Eve that the freak-show stage can be turned into a space of self-assertion and self-reliance: "What Eve has just said reverberates around my mind. It is true, under the eager eyes of the audience, I can act as lord of myself, even only for a few moments" (Garland 2013: 205). As the reader sides with Abel's perspective, Eve's enactment represents a stance of speaking back to the Victorians criticising them for exploitative, objectifying and dehumanising practice of the freak show. Therefore, Abel is central to the way we read Eve as a freak and his voice is key to uncover the underlying critical agenda of this novel. The focus on vision, self-reflectivity and self-perception testifies to that neo-Victorianism is pushing beyond traditional modes of viewing. While Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss rightfully highlight the inherent visual dynamics of neo-Victorian literature arguing that it "touches upon questions such as who can become the object of whose gaze, who is the subject of the gaze, what powers structures are implied in gazing, and how process of gazing is itself made conspicuous and reflected?" (2011: 6), I find that Garland incorporates different modes of looking to the effect of engaging the reader in a self-reflective reading of normalcy and deviance. This can clearly be seen in the author's characterisation of Abel.

Garland adds magic realism to the novel with the character of Abel—the man who cannot die and possesses no memory. He struggles throughout the novel to make meaning of his anomalous body and assert human identity and his character builds on the questions he raises regarding corporeality and humanity. On stage, Abel cuts himself severely to immediately self-heal in front of the audience and his body modification is connected to his struggle to materialise his identity. These practices of body modification and writing suit Gatens's understanding of the role of the body as something more than "a passive mediator of inscription" (1996: 4). Off stage, he attempts to trace his past through acts of writing and reading the fragmentary memories that surface up sporadically: "In a few lines of ink I make my history mine once more. I am filled with terrible relief and clutch the paper to my heart. I know who I am" (Garland 2013: 95). The difficulty to determine his identity lies in the opposition between his immortality and human characteristics. At the same time as he is portrayed as a human being with physical appearance of one, his unnatural powers contradict his humanity.

Abel's constant self-reflective endeavour to assert his identity imitates the rhetoric of the Victorian freak show:

I hide a great secret, one that marks me as grotesque. Am I man or animal? I can no longer call myself either: I do not have the comfort of calling myself beast, for a beast can be butchered for the use of mankind, and I can not serve any such purpose. Nor can I say that I am a man, for no man can do what I have done: cut myself and heal, against nature. It is terrifying. It raises hopes towards understanding only to dash them most cruelly. It thrills and humiliates me. What kind of creature am I? I have no answer. (Garland 2013: 49)

From the outset, the reader is lured into questioning his identity and humanity to discover who or what he is. While Eve's otherness resides in her assumed hybridity between mankind and animal, Abel's strangeness, or monstrosity, lies in his unnatural corporeality. In either case, their characters simultaneously elicit responses of rejection and recognition. Accordingly, the enfreakment of Eve and Abel also involves "a nature/culture split" that represents the dilemma of determining on the freak status of the observed as "some monsters are natural where others are not" (Shildrick 2002: 10).

The tension between real/fantastic, human/nonhuman, normal/abnormal is particularly marked in Abel's character. He displays his unnatural capacity to self-heal by self-inflicting severe injuries on his half-naked body. The peculiar mode of magic realism unsettles our ideas about what is real, what is not, and Abel's unnatural power to self-heal raises the question: is human or is he not? This leads me to the conclusion that neo-Victorian literature reiterates nineteenth-century discourses on freakery to explore culturally-infiltrated corporeal deviance both then and now. As Tromp and Valerius stress, the freak show has been designed to manipulate the audience to "engage in an epistemological speculation" (2008: 8). Ironically, where the spectator expects to find dis-identification, instead discovers more similarities than differences. As mentioned previously, neo-Victorianism is a performative mode that is underpinned by vocal, visual and self-reflective tenets, and several scholars have argued that this textual performance sets up a mirror-like stance between the Victorians and us. Heilmann and Llewellyn hold that "the text become[s] almost a glass permitting a double-viewed reflection" (2010: 144). Similarly, Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss assert that the "second-order observation, the very construction of subjectivity", that stems from the Lacanian concept of the I/not-I, is central to neo-Victorian literature (2011: 10-11). The ocular dialogue that arises between the observer and the observed in contemporary recreations of the Victorian freak show is resonant of nineteenth-century freak-show practises of speculating into the divergent body.

Adding to the work of these scholars, I propose that somatechnical readings of literary representations of the freakish body evidence the inextricable relationship between the body and technologies that regulate processes of normalisation. The neo-Victorian performative mode transacts nineteenth-century enfreakment strategies onto the reader perspective through epistemological readings of corporeal deviance, and in doing so, establishes a connection between the Victorians and us. Weiss sustains that

exploring the corporeal possibilities that have been foreclosed by a given culture's own imaginary, itself helps to bring into a being a new imaginary - one that does justice to the richness of our bodily differences. Changing the body image, [the scholar] maintain[s], must involve changes in the imaginary which situates the body image within a vast horizon of possible significances. (1999: 67)

Neo-Victorian enfreakment explores embodied subjectivities and the cultural processes of formation and representation of non-normative bodies. While condoning the Victorians for their view on the divergent people we tend to make the same judgement and evaluation ourselves. Garland playfully tricks the reader into adopting the standpoint of a freak-show spectator who passes judgement on the characters on display. While the reader sympathises with Eve and condemns the inhuman treatment of her, the reader is unavoidably questioning Abel's identity: is he human or is he not? Consequently, the reader is levelled to the same position as a freak-show spectator in an attempt to make sense of his identity. Williams and Bendelow insist that "discourse [...] does not simply fabricate bodies, rather, bodies shape discourses and the (rational) structures of knowledge we use to understand the world" (1998: 55). In this regard, as the human exhibits are endowed with voice, vision and agency they reveal the underlying complexities of embodied subjectivities. As the reader is engaged in an epistemological reading of the literary body, the freak character on display pushes beyond the idea of the body as a text to the effect of transforming the physical body into a lived body where technologies are enfleshed, articulated and challenged to stimulate a new imaginary of the body that stems from a process of becoming.

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