

“I was a 555-pound freak”: The Self, Freakery, and Sexuality in Celesta ‘Dolly Dimples’ Geyer’s *Diet or Die*

Jane Nicholas

Volume 21, numéro 1, 2010

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1003044ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1003044ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Canadian Historical Association / La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0847-4478 (imprimé)

1712-6274 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Nicholas, J. (2010). “I was a 555-pound freak”: The Self, Freakery, and Sexuality in Celesta ‘Dolly Dimples’ Geyer’s *Diet or Die*. *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association / Revue de la Société historique du Canada*, 21(1), 83–107.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1003044ar>

Résumé de l'article

Cet article analyse l'autobiographie d'une ancienne vedette d'exposition de curiosités vivantes (freak show), Celesta Geyer, intitulée *Diet or Die* (1968). Malgré son emploi inusité, Geyer a rédigé une autobiographie correspondant aux normes des récits populaires à propos des personnes en état de surcharge pondérale qui désirent perdre du poids afin d'avoir un corps mince idéalisé. De prime abord, le texte se lit comme un rejet absolu de l'identité d'obèse — un mot qu'elle associe fréquemment à une curiosité. L'autobiographie de Geyer démontre également comment son auteur est devenu un sujet à travers sa transformation en un phénomène de foire et révèle subtilement une profonde ambivalence concernant le poids, la sexualité et les phénomènes bizarres. À la fois autobiographie, ouvrage de croissance personnelle et manuel de régime alimentaire, le texte constitue une réflexion remarquablement complexe concernant plusieurs aspects de la société et de la culture américaine dans la première moitié du XX^e siècle ayant encore une grande résonance dans la culture actuelle obsédée par la minceur. L'autobiographie de Geyer démontre enfin les difficultés de lire et d'interpréter des autobiographies comme s'il s'agissait de la présentation d'une histoire personnelle évidente et soulève des questions quant à la manière dont les individus racontent leur propre histoire.

“I was a 555-pound freak”: The Self, Freakery, and Sexuality in Celesta ‘Dolly Dimples’ Geyer’s *Diet or Die*¹

JANE NICHOLAS

Abstract

This paper analyses former sideshow performer Celesta Geyer’s autobiography Diet or Die (1968). Despite her unusual employment in a freak show, Geyer’s autobiography fits the standard popular narrative of the disciplining of the fat body in order to achieve an idealized thin body. On the surface, the text reads as an absolute rejection of fat identity — a word that Geyer often associates with freakery. Yet, Geyer’s autobiography also shows how she became a subject through enfreakment, and it subtly reveals deep ambivalences regarding weight, sexuality and freakery. Part autobiography, part self-help manual, and part dieting advice manual, the text is a remarkably complex reflection of aspects of American culture and society in the early to mid twentieth century that has deep resonances in today’s fat phobic, dieting obsessed culture. Geyer’s autobiography also highlights the difficulties of reading and interpreting autobiographies as self-evident presentations of personal history and raises questions of how individuals tell their own stories.

Résumé

Cet article analyse l’autobiographie d’une ancienne vedette d’exposition de curiosités vivantes (freak show), Celesta Geyer, intitulée Diet or Die (1968). Malgré son emploi inusité, Geyer a rédigé une autobiographie correspondant aux normes des récits populaires à propos des personnes en état de surcharge pondérale qui désirent perdre du poids afin d’avoir un corps mince idéalisé. De prime abord, le texte se lit comme un rejet absolu de l’identité d’obèse — un mot qu’elle associe fréquemment à une curiosité. L’autobiographie de Geyer démontre également comment son auteur est devenu un sujet à travers sa transformation en un phénomène de foire et révèle subtilement une profonde ambivalence concernant le poids, la sexualité et les phénomènes bizarres. À la fois autobiographie, ouvrage de croissance personnelle et manuel de régime alimentaire, le texte constitue une réflexion remarquablement complexe concernant plusieurs aspects de la société et de la culture américaine dans la

première moitié du XX^e siècle ayant encore une grande résonance dans la culture actuelle obsédée par la minceur. L'autobiographie de Geyer démontre enfin les difficultés de lire et d'interpréter des autobiographies comme s'il s'agissait de la présentation d'une histoire personnelle évidente et soulève des questions quant à la manière dont les individus racontent leur propre histoire.

In 1968, former sideshow “Fat Lady” Celesta Geyer simultaneously published her autobiography under two different titles: *Diet or Die: The Dolly Dimples Weight Reducing Plan* and *The Greatest Diet in the World*.² Virtually identical in content, the two books reveal Geyer’s multiple transformations of self from an “ordinary” woman to a side show “Fat Lady” named Dolly Dimples to a 112-pound “Champion Dieter of the World.” Geyer’s story reveals how weight loss changed her life from being a marginal member of society working in a freak show to a middle-class housewife and medical “miracle.” Her participation in sideshows as “a 555-pound freak” was in many ways exploitative and firmly entrenched as part of the fear of and discrimination against fat in contemporary American society. Her autobiography, however, reveals the complexities of identity and the multiple transformations of self that are driven by the performance of the body. Incorporated into her autobiography are narratives of marginality, self-improvement, fear of corporeal excesses, and finally “triumph” in the form of thinness. This paper explores the discursive construction of Geyer’s transformation from an embarrassed, exposed, sideshow freak to a “happy, healthy normal woman” as a reflection of cultural and medical discourses of fat, gender, and sexuality. Despite her unusual employment in a freak show, Geyer’s autobiography reveals what would become a standard, popular narrative of the disciplining of the fat body and its related physical alterations as well as underlying fears about bodies out of control. On the surface, the text reads as an absolute rejection of fat identity — a word she often associates with freakery. Yet, Geyer’s autobiography also shows how she became a subject through enfreakment and subtly reveals deep ambivalences regarding weight and freakery. Part autobiography, part self-help manual, and part dieting advice, the text is a remarkably complex reflection of aspects of American culture and society in the early to mid-twentieth century that has deep resonances in today’s fat phobic, dieting obsessed culture. Geyer’s various states of corporeal “being” and her subsequent transformations remained part of a public display and, despite the changes in her employment, being viewed as exceptional (first as a freak and later as a champion dieter) remained constant. Geyer’s autobiography also highlights the difficulties of reading and interpreting autobiographies as self-evident presentations of personal history and raises questions of how individuals tell their own stories.

The current cultural, moral panic about obesity has sparked explorations into the history of fat and obesity as both a cultural phenomena and disease.

“I WAS A 555-POUND FREAK”: THE SELF, FREAKERY, AND SEXUALITY
IN CELESTA ‘DOLLY DIMPLES’ GEYER’S DIET OR DIE

Work by Peter Stearns and Sander Gilman has stressed the changing historical and cultural constructions of fat.³ Stearns focused on the peculiarities of American and French dieting culture that intensified in the middle decades of the twentieth century as fears of over-consumption of food delineated moral boundaries. Gilman’s *Fat* outlined the cultural anxieties and debates over obesity from the nineteenth century and included a more global perspective exploring British literature, American culture, and the rising concern over obesity in China. Canadian historian Wendy Mitchinson has provided a much needed analysis of physicians’ changing ideas, definitions, and treatments of obesity. Defining what actually constitutes obesity has proven to be a challenging task for Western medicine.⁴ Collectively, these works and others, especially those from the burgeoning field of Fat Studies, reveal the need to think critically and carefully about the obese body — how it has been constituted and understood in particular moments.⁵ As such, this article builds from these studies to explore the unique text of Geyer’s autobiography as a reflection of some of the deep ambivalences regarding fat, freakery, sexuality, and the performance of obesity.

There are a number of methodological issues in writing the history of freak shows and performers, not the least of which is the need to discuss how words like freak and fat are employed. My use of the word freak describes the performance of the body as somehow spectacular, while recognizing that freakery, as a cultural category, does not exist beyond performance. There is nothing natural or inherent to being a freak, and many so-called bodily differences that are highlighted and performed on the freak show are otherwise normalized through every day practices.⁶ What the process of enfreakment does is provide a new context and discourse for the understanding of differences that highlights them as the focus of the self and identity.

Much of the literature on the history of freak shows has focused on their heyday in the mid- to late nineteenth century.⁷ Freak shows, however, continued well into the twentieth century, although they were modified as they came under more and more pressure to “clean up their acts” in line with new ideas about disability, consent, and race.⁸ Fat shows remained throughout the twentieth century and their existence highlighted how fat remained an area of publicly acceptable discrimination. In 1973, renowned psychiatrist and eating disorders expert Hilde Bruch noted in her now classic book *Eating Disorders* that “people with such extreme obesity are rare — so rare that they sometimes earn their living by exhibiting themselves as one of nature’s curiosities. The discovery of a new fat man or woman is newsworthy.”⁹ The appeal of the obese body continued to entice audiences to fat sideshows.

In its current usage, the word fat can be both derogatory and liberating. Recently, the burgeoning field of Fat Studies has reclaimed “fat” as an analytical category closely tied to a political project. The editors of *The Fat Studies*

Reader explain that “fat studies is an interdisciplinary field of scholarship marked by an aggressive, consistent, rigorous critique of the negative assumptions, stereotypes, and stigma placed on fat and the fat body.”¹⁰ Fat studies is engaged in a political project of reclaiming the word fat as a political identity, and that words such as obese or overweight are not neutral descriptors, but fraught and politicized terms. As Marilyn Wann reminds us, “fat functions as a floating signifier, attaching to individuals based on a power relationship, not a physical measurement.”¹¹ Thus, both freakery and fat exist at the nexus of power relationships that highlight how bodies that existed beyond twentieth-century ideals challenged deeply held cultural assumptions about identity, self-presentation, and cultural representation.

Freakery and Autobiography: The Multiple Lives of Celesta “Dolly Dimples” Geyer

In 1933, Clyde Ingalls, manager of the combined Ringling Brothers and Barnum Bailey Circus, stated: “Aside from such unusual attractions as the famous three-legged man and the Siamese twins combinations, freaks are what you make them. Take any peculiar looking person, whose familiarity to those around him makes for acceptance, play up that peculiarity and add a good spiel and you have a great attraction.”¹² The spiel, a carefully constructed narrative of the body, was an essential component in turning a person into a freak attraction. The sensational and extraordinary were highlighted to create an identity that was at once strange and yet familiar. “They” had to be almost like “us.”¹³ Biographies were an essential aspect of the process of enfreakment as audiences could not simply read the spectacle and make sense of it. Interpretations had to be directed, spectacularized, and made alluring. Yet, sideshow spiels seem beyond even the margins of traditional autobiographies. The standard historiographical description of autobiography would suggest a tradition reserved for great men telling true stories of their extraordinary achievements. Under this rubric, Geyer’s life as a female sideshow performer and then champion dieter seems atypical. But, Geyer was not entirely unusual as a freak performer who wrote an autobiography, as there is a history of freaks who published various forms of life writing on their performances and experiences. Their extraordinariness, combined with their status as quasi-celebrities, eschewed many of the traditions of autobiographical writing; that freak autobiographies were usually enmeshed with the sideshow ballyhoo makes them difficult to read as historical sources.¹⁴ Recent work on the genres of autobiography, biography and life writing, however, suggest that all forms of writing the self are not stable, neutral texts that merely describe the doings of a life. As Liz Stanley argues, “the apparently referential and unique selves that auto-biographical accounts invoke are actually invocations of a cultural representation of what selves should be: these are shared ideas, conventions, about a cultural form: not

“I WAS A 555-POUND FREAK”: THE SELF, FREAKERY, AND SEXUALITY
IN CELESTA ‘DOLLY DIMPLES’ GEYER’S DIET OR DIE

descriptions of actual lives but interpretations within the convention.”¹⁵ The idea of “what selves should be” is the source of much of the tension in the text. Geyer’s life story is structured by common cultural narratives that suggest life as a freak is at best exploitative, that being fat is bad, and that thinness and ordinary, middle-class American family life are progressive — a source of respectability and pride. Geyer’s autobiography can be seen as a reflection of the struggle to make a normal self, but, importantly, it also undercuts this framework. Life writing of sideshow performers, like Geyer’s, challenges the idea of an authentic self and reveal the contradictions and ambiguities in the production of it.

The tensions in the text may have had an impact on its acceptance — or lack thereof. After the publication of *Diet or Die* there were a number of announcements and columns published in newspapers across North America. Even co-author Samuel Roen wrote a brief newspaper article attempting to stir interest in the book.¹⁶ Despite the increased interest in dieting and weight loss and the appeal of a behind-the-scenes look at freak shows, Geyer’s autobiography was not a commercial or critical success. The fact that the book was part self-help manual, part dieting book, and part autobiography may have confused potential audiences. The basic story of shedding a fat body as a narrative of success and encouragement for others would have been familiar and, despite her aggrandized claims, Geyer was not really offering much new to dieting culture. In 1948, for example, the popular young woman’s magazine *Seventeen* published “The Fattest Girl in the Class” about Jane — an overweight and socially stigmatized teen who drops pounds and becomes happy.¹⁷ But Geyer’s story was not a neat narrative of high school stigma and weight loss success. The discussion and presentation of fatness, freakery, sexuality, and femininity may simply have been too far beyond the boundaries of acceptable autobiographical practices. Perhaps Geyer could not simply overcome the freak show stigma. One newspaper announced: “As quick to capitalize on her thinness as on her obesity, Dolly has written a book listing her secret diet foods, special hot baths and skin shrinking creams.”¹⁸ Yet, the book was not simply a how-to guide and, in fact, readers looking for an entire book worth of dieting advice would have been disappointed, since a majority of the book is a recollection of her life as freak show performer. This alone could have offended potential readers looking for weight loss advice. It was one thing to be morally shamed as a fat person in America, but another entirely to be associated with the culturally low freak. The significance of the text, however, is reflected in the fact that it was not well-received. Although Geyer’s autobiography fit within specific discourses of dieting, medical power, and addiction, the challenge of obesity, desirability, and sexuality were significant aspects of the text that undercut the possibility of a simple narrative of transformation from fat and unhappy to thin and happy. As the rest of this paper argues, in some ways Geyer flowed with the dominant

ideals of the middle decades of the twentieth century, but sometimes (and with critical issues of sexuality and weight) Geyer chafed against those ideals, if only subtly so.

Geyer's autobiography follows a traditional trajectory of chronological events beginning with her parents, her birth, childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. Celesta Hermann was born on 18 July 1901, in Cincinnati to a family that existed on the margins of the American middle-class. Her father, a German immigrant, ran a tavern along with Celesta's mother, who was born in America to a German family. Geyer begins her autobiography by appealing to a long tradition of rich German food that marked both her family history and her own upbringing. She writes, "He [her paternal grandfather] learned early in life that his fellow Germans loved well-seasoned, well-prepared, heavy food. The culinary arts he inherited, along with those my mother absorbed in her German family, were to be my undoing or, more accurately, my ondoing."¹⁹ The first few chapters of the book are rich with descriptions of traditional German food and her mother's cooking, which seem to be the exception in her mother's so-called "Americanization project." Her autobiography reveals that her childhood and adolescence were marked by teasing and exclusion because of her weight. She was called Tubby and Fatso and she later recalled that these names were "like sharp knives [that] had been plunged deep into me."²⁰ After school she, like most young women of her generation, experienced a period of work between school and marriage. Unusually, she also travelled alone in the United States and to Cuba. On 17 January 1925, she married Frank Geyer. By the end of the 1920s, the midwest was suffering from a period of economic hardship and Frank lost his job. As a result they moved to Detroit where, on a bit of a whim, they went to the Happy Land Carnival where Celesta saw Jolly Pearl Stanley perform and, after speaking with Pearl and deliberating on her situation for days, decided to join the sideshow as a fat performer. In 1929, Celesta, her husband, and Hymie Wagner, a sideshow owner working in New York, came up with the stage name "Dolly Dimples," the name that stayed with her. From 1927 to 1950, Celesta worked the sideshow circuits as a Fat Lady under the stage names Bonnie Sonora, Dolly Dimples, and Madame Celeste — the latter identified her short career as a palmist. Geyer performed mostly as Dolly Dimples until 1950 when, after a health crisis, she was told by her doctor that she must choose between dieting or dying. That year, she went on a physician-supervised highly restrictive diet and lost over 400 pounds in less than twelve months.

Geyer's maturation and transition from adolescence to adulthood came at a time when thinness was increasingly the standard for female beauty. Geyer's childhood and adolescence occurred during a period when fat was seen as a medical and psychological problem, and popular culture associated thinness with success and beauty. Moreover, modern dieting culture was deeply gen-

“I WAS A 555-POUND FREAK”: THE SELF, FREAKERY, AND SEXUALITY
IN CELESTA ‘DOLLY DIMPLES’ GEYER’S DIET OR DIE

dered with girls and women becoming the object of increasingly intense scrutiny and judgment.²¹ While obesity had long been seen as a health concern, American culture and medicine were increasingly fine-tuned to the issue of weight and the intake of calories that conflated health and slenderness. At the turn of the twentieth century actuarial scientists — sometimes in connection with the insurance industry — developed standardized height and weight charts that shifted the way that physicians, including paediatricians, determined overweight and its meanings.²² Such ideas flowed into popular culture. American women’s magazines, for example, warned mothers that overweight daughters could suffer from isolation, and often equated thinness and personal success. The charts themselves did not remain static. From the 1930s to the 1980s, Americans lived with changing standards of calorie consumption and height/weight ratio ideals, which promoted reduced calorie intake and ideals of thinness. Science, medicine, industry, and culture formed a web of thinness promotion.²³

Throughout the early decades of the twentieth century, changes in fashion and ideas of beauty promoted an increasingly slender female body. Women’s clothing featured more tubular designs and new styles, such as the hobble skirt, that flattered, if not demanded thinner bodies. By the 1920s, epitomized by the prolific look of the Modern Girl, women were meant to be long and slender to the point of seeming linear. Evidence strongly suggests that many ordinary women took up body projects such as dieting in order to attempt to achieve a flapper-like body. The Modern Girl’s body may have been extreme, but body projects for women, especially those trying to maintain a slender body, were unrelenting during the middle decades of the twentieth century. Even the so-called curvaceous body of postwar America maintained thinness as an ideal.²⁴ Shifts in the production of clothing reinforced the trend. Standardized sizing meant women whose bodies were seen as beyond normal sizes had a difficult time finding popular, ready-made clothing. As a result, Geyer’s weight kept her from participating in one of the key feminine pleasures of the twentieth century: shopping for clothing. This was clearly an issue for Geyer, as she recalls the lure of a “store-bought dress.” She writes:

... by the fall of 1950, I was promised I might go shopping for a store-bought dress. Oh, how I looked ahead to that day. I bought fashion magazines and looked at the different beautiful dresses displayed in them. And I dreamed of the day ahead when I could actually go into one of our shops or department stores here and confidently ask for the particular dress I saw advertised.²⁵

Discourses of health, representations of ideal beauty, and even material goods, rendered fat female bodies unattractive and unhealthy.

Meeting the hegemonic cultural standards for weight symbolized health, control, and even white, middle-class success, as being overweight was associ-

ated with the marginalized bodies of the working classes and immigrants.²⁶ Geyer's status as a fat girl, adolescent, and woman was thus one caught in a web of fat phobia and gender, class, and ethnic divisions. The daughter of German immigrant parents who maintained Old World eating habits, Geyer's body was beyond the dominant ideals of desirability driven by the white, middle class. Her mother's food preparation in the text is depicted as indulgent, excessive, and perhaps even backward. At the very least her mother is presented as out of step with the parenting advice American women's magazines promoted in regard to daughters' diets and weight issues. Geyer's childhood memories of her mother's food and feeding habits act as a "signifier of difference." Overcoming this difference was part of her dramatic weight loss. Her triumph in thinness was a conquering of childhood eating habits and a diet that was more aligned with mainstream postwar culture.²⁷ Moreover, in illustrating the dramatic shift to an 800-calorie a day diet, Geyer described giving up "the old-time Herrmann duck or goose because they are too fat and too heavy with hidden calories" and sugar — a real sacrifice given a "childhood with all the delicious sweet pastries." Later on while on a visit to her family, Geyer faced "wonderful old-country German dishes," but maintained her diet and reported to her doctor that she lost weight during the trip.²⁸

Geyer's status as a white and later solidly middle-class woman (the standpoint from which she writes), shapes her autobiography, and Geyer works to establish her authority from this position. Other than food and her father's heavily accented speech (one of the few accented voices in the text), her German roots are largely absent from her adulthood until she has to conquer her food addiction and refuse the comfort food of her youth. If her ethnicity formed part of her marginalization as a child (a result of her mother's Old World ideas of food and feeding), racist divisions between blacks and whites gave her a sense of inclusion as an adult. At a number of points during the book, Geyer attempts to assert agency as a white woman in opposition to non-white peoples. When her brother discovers her interest in joining a sideshow and calls it a "ridiculous idea," Geyer counters, "I'm free, white and over twenty-one."²⁹ In describing her brief interlude as a palm reader, Geyer also clearly distinguishes between black and white customers. Blacks are represented as superstitious gamblers and ignorant mothers. At one point, a black woman allegedly brings her child to Geyer because she has suddenly become deaf. After Geyer cleans out the child's ear of a "clod of dirt and wax," the mother exclaims "'It's a mirkles, it's a mirkles.'" Geyer describes the scene as a "primitive demonstration."³⁰ These recollections work to provide Geyer with some sort of authority and power, albeit in deeply troubling and racist ways. If her mother attempted to Americanize Geyer's father and the family, Geyer uses these moments to try to complete this project and define herself as white and American.

From this standpoint Geyer offers a narrative of her life that is distinctly

"I WAS A 555-POUND FREAK": THE SELF, FREAKERY, AND SEXUALITY
IN CELESTA 'DOLLY DIMPLES' GEYER'S DIET OR DIE

confessional and at once intimate and distant. Significantly, addiction frames her discussion of obesity. The opening sentence of the book proclaims: "For almost fifty years I was addicted to food. Like the poor souls who are caught in the horrible clutches of alcohol and narcotics, I was caught in the clutches of my own jaws. I was a 555-pound freak; the side-show fat lady."³¹ By paralleling her journey of gaining and losing weight with addiction, Geyer reaffirms obesity as an illness best suited for medical treatment, mirroring the connections between the discourses of addiction and disease strengthening in the 1950s and 1960s. Moreover, Geyer taps into the increasingly popular movement of women joining recovery programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous and Overeaters Anonymous, which, by the 1950s, were part of a wide network of addiction recovery that was turning into big business in the United States. These strategies, in turn, helped to position Geyer as an expert based on her lived experience.³²

Geyer's autobiography is also in part a self-help book and thus fits with the self-help movement of 1950s and 1960s America. As Steven Starker argues in *Oracle at the Supermarket*, burgeoning literature on diet, health and self-help along with "pop theology" marked the middle decades of twentieth century literatures on self-help.³³ The front cover of *Diet or Die* exclaims "Dolly Dimples solved a problem common to millions of Americans: overweight...*Diet or Die* is not only the story of this determined lady's life, but it is a blueprint that shows you how to lose weight the sensible and healthful way."³⁴ At the end of the book is one week's worth of menus, including calorie counts for individual items as well as the entire day. On her medically supervised diet, she never ate more than 350 calories at a meal and her total intake for a day ranged from 785–804 calories, essentially a starvation diet that reveals the irony of pitching the book as promoting sensible and healthy weight loss, but fits within the dieting fads of the period that frequently advocated starvation diets. The precise recording of calorie counts speaks to the precision and discipline with which Geyer changed her body.³⁵ Following the menus is a recipe section, including "Dolly Dimple's Delight" — a canned salmon salad recipe — and five salad dressing recipes listed under the heading "Dolly's Delicious Dressings." For Geyer, the seeming success of her weight loss had been turned into a gift she felt compelled to share with the many overweight Americans, and these recipes are part of it. At the conclusion of the book, she writes:

Since I have successfully lived to diet, my story has been told piecemeal in newspapers and in a magazine article. I've also made some appearances on network radio and television because my problem of obesity is the malady of America. Practically everyone I talk to is overweight from one to a hundred pounds, and some even more than that. I have thousands of letters from people pleading pathetically for help What I have said here, with my author Samuel Roen, I hope will serve as an inspiration to help others overcome their

own problems. To all these people I can promise all the joy and happiness I have won if they will only ask God for the will to diet. This and this alone is the way. For all is possible if it is in your soul. Believe me, I know whereof I speak.³⁶

Her proselytizing was part her cure. Geyer's confessional strategies combined with the religious overtones and quest to be inspirational fit well within American dieting culture of the 1950s and 1960s, wherein groups such as Overeaters Anonymous, working from the AA model, stressed "personal change, a spiritual rebirth" that would provide a salve for the psychological roots of obesity. Fat, after all, had come to be seen as a personal weakness and a sign of overindulgence and consumption that revealed a deep personal failing.³⁷

Early in the text, in chapter two, Geyer makes clear that her problem of obesity was neither physiological or genetic, and thus upheld the popular American narrative of obesity as a problem of individual will-power and over consumption. She emphasized her normality at birth and writes:

There was never anything abnormal about me physiologically, and my doctor has assured me and reassured me that I never had anything so convenient as a glandular disturbance to explain away my fat. "Physical disorders causing obesity are distinctly rare," he told me, "and certainly you never had any such disorder." Heredity was ruled out too because all of the Herrmann flock had the same heredity as I, yet I was the only side-show fatty."³⁸

Drawing again on the theme of addiction, Geyer characterizes her eating habits initially as a love of food and a source of comfort that becomes disabling. When her access to food is restricted she speaks as though she went through withdrawal suffering from hunger pangs and other painful physiological symptoms as well as sweats and nightmares.³⁹

The idea of "living to diet" is a repeated theme in the book and a central trope in the discourse of dieting. Like the process of enfreakment that required constant performance, dieting was pitched as a lifestyle change, not a short term solution. Like the alcoholic that must pledge to never drink again, the obese person must commit to a lifetime of restricted eating. Moreover, it required the dedication of one's life, thus Geyer lived to diet and, within the medical model discourse of treating obesity, saved her life. Ultimately, the dominant narrative of *Diet or Die* is one of shame in being fat and redemption in the form of thinness. As such, the book fits with the contemporary hegemonic discourses of fat described by Kathleen LeBesco as "repulsive, funny, ugly, unclean, obscene, and above all, as something to lose."⁴⁰ Geyer's transformation, however, engages with the ballyhoo discourse of American dieting culture. Her pitch to the public is one that promised rebirth and success following the cultural nar-

“I WAS A 555-POUND FREAK”: THE SELF, FREAKERY, AND SEXUALITY
IN CELESTA ‘DOLLY DIMPLES’ GEYER’S DIET OR DIE

rative of “if I can do it, you can do it.” As Sander L. Glimann has recently argued:

DiETING has become the means of self-liberation or of self-control and self-limitation. It is a process by which the individual claims control over her body and thus shows her ability to understand her role in society. From the Enlightenment to the present, the healthy body is also the body in control of its own destiny — a basic claim of Enlightenment ideology The will becomes that which is healed by the dieting process and enables the rational mind to control the body.⁴¹

Geyer’s transition to what she refers to as healthy, normal womanhood is celebrated by her ability to literally fit in. Although scholars and medical practitioners have debated whether or not obesity should be considered a disability, at points in the text Geyer discusses her limitations because of her weight and reveals the culturally constructed nature of her disability and its close relationship to discrimination: movie and airplane seats are too small, furniture is not strong enough, hoteliers refuse her because they are afraid she will break the bed.⁴² Geyer has a breakdown when fellow fat show performer Jolly Pearl Stanley dies and her body is treated with indignity as it cannot be transported in a hearse or fit within standard sized coffins. Geyer writes, “No coffin in the entire world could hold this over-700-pound monster.”⁴³ These moments in the book are represented as indignities and embarrassments that reaffirm the fat body as beyond the limits. Although her body is rarely explicitly discussed in the text, Geyer reveals intimate details about Jolly Pearl: her immobility, the fact she performed while seated on a well-concealed, specially designed toilet, and “a layer of fat that flabbed like an appendage of baker’s dough down to her knees.”⁴⁴ Yet, Geyer’s presentation of the seeming indignities of Pearl’s existence serve to highlight her own beauty and desirability. Shortly after Jolly Pearl’s death, Geyer returns for another season on the sideshow where she performs with the “Congress of Fat People” doing a “provocative” hula dance that attracts a male suitor who eventually proposes marriage.⁴⁵

That the text is shot through with medical discourse is unsurprising. By the middle decades of the twentieth century, as Geyer was at the height of her career, the struggle for discursive control over the extraordinary body was even more firmly in the hands of the medical profession.⁴⁶ Physicians and practitioners of medical science had long been key players on the sideshow, sometimes providing evidence and testimonials for spiels and pamphlets in exchange for the ability to examine the unusual body of the freak performer. The power of physicians to treat Geyer’s body — as a site of obesity and addiction — is uncontested in *Diet or Die*, and Geyer’s autobiography is enabled by her claim to a connection with medical authority. Geyer transforms herself into a model patient, who pleases her doctors with her remarkable weight loss;

thereby transforming herself once again from patient to diet expert based on life experience. While her doctors remain underdeveloped characters, they propel the narrative to its triumphant conclusion. Dr. Hicks is referred to as Geyer's "guardian angel," who speaks the magic words to her: "Dolly you have lived to diet, if you don't you'll die. Think about it." This phrase becomes Geyer's mantra — and subsequently the title of one of the copies of her book — "Diet or Die" as she concludes: "I knew that I had come through the shadows of death and that I now lived to diet."⁴⁷

While obesity is at the heart of the narrative, it is really about the making of the self and the complexities and contradictions of that process. The internal logic of the text is ostensibly driven by narratives of self-improvement and the achievement of personal happiness and self-acceptance through weight loss. Health, while critical in providing the moment when she enters the medical model for treatment, is secondary. Despite this seemingly singular logic, the text is actually more complicated. The shaping of her life was marked by wider social and cultural forces that not only appealed to Geyer, but also against which she chaffed. The next section discusses Geyer's freak show performance as a sideshow Fat Lady. The final section of the paper addresses the ambivalences of fat, freakery, and sexuality in Geyer's autobiography.

Performing the Fat Body: Enfreakment and the Transformation of Celesta Geyer

Judith Butler argues that "performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration."⁴⁸ As such, no body is beyond the realm of performativity, but in the case of freak shows this performativity is so obvious and yet so naturalized that it reveals many of the fault lines in the construction of the normalized body. Freakery comes into existence through the performance of the body — a performance that must be repeated incessantly to produce the effect of difference or abnormality. Playing off of and disrupting the normal codes of performance, the process of enfreakment is a constant one wherein sideshow workers try to consistently emphasize what is deemed as extraordinary. As Geyer's own experience at the Happy Land Carnival reveals, there was nothing naturally freaky about her existence. She went to the carnival as a spectator and a consumer. Yet, Geyer describes a mysterious force that attracted her to the carnival, and this is one of the key turning points in the autobiography. She writes

As we entered the ground I immediately spotted the banners of the fat lady's tent. The same strange power drew me magnetically closer. As we approached the tent, the ticket seller called out to me, "Hey, c'mon over."

“I WAS A 555-POUND FREAK”: THE SELF, FREAKERY, AND SEXUALITY
IN CELESTA ‘DOLLY DIMPLES’ GEYER’S DIET OR DIE

My courage dropped and my heart sank as we continued in his direction, but I took hold of myself and when we were within a few feet of him I boomed out at him, “Do you want to see a real 338-pound fat lady? I’ll be I’m a lot fatter than the one you have behind your canvas.”

He burst into laughter and said, “Little girl, you ain’t seen nuthin’ if you think you’re fat. Go on it and see Jolly Pearl if you want to see a fat girl...and,” he added, “it’s on the house.”

Inside I couldn’t believe what I saw. There she was — Jolly Pearl Stanley, a 700-pound mountain of flesh and bone, but I could not see any bone under the depth of fat. I was amazed. I never dreamed that anyone could be so tremendous. I never dreamed that anyone could be so much bigger, so much fatter than I. Even more amazing than her immenseness was her jovial happy attitude. The heavy weight she carried could not hold down her buoyant spirit. I liked her immediately and she seemed to like me too.

“You know,” she offered after we had talked a while, “we could use you in our show.”⁴⁹

Deciding to join the sideshow meant performing her body as a freak — not changing it or modifying it except through its narration and performance. It was a constellation of forces that brought Geyer and her husband to participate in freak shows, including Frank’s unemployment and Celesta’s desire to force cruel commentators on her body to pay for doing so. As Jolly Pearl Stanley says to her, “You know, honey, everyone laughs at you now. Don’t you think it would be a good idea to make them pay for their fun?”⁵⁰ Earlier in the text, Geyer has already set up her anger at being turned into a curiosity and a freak. On a trip to Havana, Cuba, Geyer finds work in a bar, but quickly discovers that she “was hired not as a waitress but as a freak. Every drink I served evoked laughter in some part of the lounge. It hit me squarely that the operator of the bar was using my appearance in his place as a novelty.” And later, back in Cincinnati, selling cosmetics, she recalls, “I got a real taste of being a one-woman side-show long before I learned I could make it a paying profession. I did not like it either.”⁵¹ Such examples serve to naturalize obesity as a curious, freak attraction and thus undercut the performative aspect of such displays.

For Geyer, getting paid as a performer on the freak show allowed her to assert some measure of control over the representation of her body. Her decision to join the sideshow as a freak was unpopular with her family, especially her brother, but she defended her position arguing, “What I had seen at the carnival convinced me that being fat could bring out some nice things from people, which never happened in everyday life.”⁵² Taking on the role of sideshow freak allowed Geyer to speak back. Significantly, it is in her exchange with the sideshow barker that she claims her fatness for the first time in the book. In many ways she fights the objectification of her body by becoming a freak subject. She watches and passes judgment on audience members inverting the

usual power relations she writes of in the book as being only the cruel subject of people's critical gaze. Moreover, she asserts agency as a fat woman and this is the opposite of what happens to her living as an everyday overweight woman, who is ridiculed, shamed, and silenced by comments on her weight. While there is no place for her to speak back as an obese woman facing judgment in American society, as a freak performer she can be both aggressive and subversive in responding to comments.

Sideshow performers had the potentially transgressive power to talk back to customers, but this had to be carefully negotiated, since as Geyer quickly found out, talking back could have financial repercussions. Dolly recounts that she was frustrated by her reactions that drove customers away and received advice from Jolly Pearl. She learned from Pearl that people "come to the carnival to have a good time and it's our job to help see that they have that good time."⁵³ While paid by the companies, performers relied on additional sales of cards to boost their income. Geyer's *carte de visites* reveal the sexualized nature of the display that was at once subverting and appealing to the tradition of the pin up or reclining nude. These cards were popular and provided an additional source of income for performers, but from the beginning of her sideshow career, Geyer's were unique. As Jolly Pearl tells her, "There's real money in these pictures ... you'll be surprised to see how many people will want a picture of such a pretty fat girl."⁵⁴ The photographs included in the book reveal how Geyer, as Dolly, frequently posed with her legs open and/or holding up her already skimpy baby doll dress to reveal more of her legs. Sales from *carte de visites* would have been especially important for fat ladies since "in the hierarchy of the freak world, the Fat Lady had little status. While many freaks earned hundreds of dollars a week, fat women were hired for \$25–50 a week."⁵⁵

Performing for an audience in search of a good time suggests performances in line with the trope of happy, fat woman, and in some ways Geyer met those expectations. Geyer describes the necessity of performing the body as a Fat Lady with regard to a show in 1949 in which she lost the magic of performance and shut down her exhibit for a few hours until she could regain her energy. Performing as a Fat Lady required movement, interaction with the audience and often times more traditional aspects of performance such as singing and dancing. While these acts were planned and staged, there were also extemporaneous elements. In the same stop with Cumberland Valley Shows, Geyer describes letting a female audience member "feel my body," which "permitted the paying customers to learn first hand that I was real." The next day, after she had sung, she asked the audience, "Who would like to see me do a shimmy?" To which audience members offered a host of offensive responses including, "You're too fat to dance." As Dolly Dimples, Geyer challenged audience members replying, "Honey, I've got it all over those skinny girls. All I have to do to shimmy is run, stop suddenly and let nature take its course — like this." A dance followed.⁵⁶

“I WAS A 555-POUND FREAK”: THE SELF, FREAKERY, AND SEXUALITY
IN CELESTA ‘DOLLY DIMPLES’ GEYER’S DIET OR DIE

Geyer’s act reflected the very specific ways of organizing the display of fat women’s bodies that made them extraordinary. Geyer’s performance only functioned if the body was suitably revealed and as such Fat Ladies were almost always displayed in scanty and often child-like clothing. This revelation of the body functioned in a couple of different ways. Child-like clothing, such as satin baby doll dresses, made the adult women seem child-like themselves and organized a power imbalance so that the interactions between viewers and performers were not hostile.⁵⁷ Scanty clothing also highlighted the body and worked to try to ensure the authenticity of the display by allowing visual confirmation, although touching and dialogue were also important. Geyer recalls that a woman in Pittsburgh once asked her if her legs were real. Geyer responded that they were falsely inflated through an intake valve in her big toe. The woman responded “Why don’t you run away some night when they let the air out?”⁵⁸

Geyer’s performances also subverted the dominant discourse on the exclusion of fat people by playing on common tropes of discrimination. Part of the means by which Geyer transformed herself into a freak was through banners that would attract visitors to her tent. Geyer’s banners were specially designed and she describes them with pride. Each banner reflected a real life experience and/or common representations of popular fat phobias. For example, they showed “Dolly” being refused a room in a hotel based on size, the shoddy remark of a taxi driver refusing service, and beachgoers trying to assist Dolly to her feet. In another Dolly is being measured for a dress and describes the banner as:

I had one with two girls stringing a tape around the body where the waistline should have been. The first girl exclaims, “Seven feet around the waist,” to which the second girl answers, “That’s more than four normal women,” as Dolly smilingly looks on.⁵⁹

As a freak performer Dolly both plays into and challenges widespread discriminatory practices. The latter played on the problem of standardized sizes and the embarrassing interactions with sales clerks and even other shoppers. The entire text of her performance played on the desire of audience members to see an unusual body, but once inside her tent Geyer could exercise more control by engaging audience members in a dialogue on her body, which could reveal a disarming satisfaction (as opposed to embarrassment) in her fat body. Geyer reveals that she had pride in her work, remarking: “My reputation as an attraction spread well in the outdoor show world. I was elated with this because popularity in show business usually means increased drawing power and financial rewards.”⁶⁰

In 1950, Geyer began the process of untangling herself and her body from the freak show, but this was not simply connected to losing weight, as there was no natural association between losing weight and leaving the fat shows. It was

a deeper process of change in performance and Geyer shifted from extraordinary Fat Lady on the sideshow to extraordinary, but exemplary patient. Yet Geyer was never far from the world of show business. Her sideshow identity framed her thin identity and it was not simply that her transformation could not be remarkable without it. What marked her identity as Dolly Dimples was not merely her weight, but her exceptionality and uniqueness, and in this way her transformation to thinness allowed her to keep her Dolly identity. Significantly, Geyer did not try to lose her sideshow past along with the weight.

As Kerry Duff argues, “expanding the terrain of what counts as autobiography” to include freak show performers “allows us to pay attention to the complexities of personal storytelling, the way it is both an opportunity to speak as subject” and a way to map the diverse cultural field that frames and regulates legitimate subjectivities.⁶¹ Geyer’s text reveals the subtle ways enfreakment created opportunities to express subjectivity as an obese woman undercutting dominant discriminatory narratives about thinness and the self. Geyer’s work upholds and challenges what Rosemary Garland Thomson argues is the American Ideal of the self-governed, self-determined, autonomous and progressive body.⁶² While the autobiography of Geyer’s diet shows the drastic disciplining of the fat body in the production of a thin one, this comes at an incredible, although largely unacknowledged cost. The success of her diet certainly seems to produce a stable self in line with discourses of success, self-improvement, and white, middle-class perfection; but it takes away the critical voice Geyer achieved through her performances where she challenged discriminatory ideas about fat.

Sexuality Behind the Canvas

Geyer’s presentation of sexuality in the text is deeply ambivalent. Marginalized as a youth for her weight, Geyer frequently repeats the cultural narrative that fat women cannot be sexually attractive, despite the fact that she has a number of interested suitors. Here again, with regard to sexuality, her performances on the freak show provide her with an outlet to legitimate her heterosexuality and reveal her ability to meet heteronormative standards of beauty. If fat was deemed to be repulsive, the fat female body also had the potential to be highly desirable, although still potentially objectifying if the admiration turned into a fetish. Tanfer Emin has argued that freak performances at Coney Island, including fat performers like “Dolly Dimples,” represented an erotic threat, although the Fay Lady’s presentation as childlike mediated eugenic concerns about their ability to procreate and raise normal size children.⁶³ Geyer’s discussions of sexuality and desirability in the text, however, are more complicated than such an interpretation of her performances might suggest.

Her first experiences learning about sexuality came through her “bad girl” friends — Kathy, Ellen, and Betty — outcast girls and young women, who are

"I WAS A 555-POUND FREAK": THE SELF, FREAKERY, AND SEXUALITY
IN CELESTA 'DOLLY DIMPLES' GEYER'S DIET OR DIE

the majority of her friends introduced in her childhood and adolescence. What Geyer and these other young women seem to share is an outcast status based on their bodies and the narrative is one that emphasizes marginality. When Kathy is introduced as Geyer's friend in the text, she is described as "a thirteen-year-old who lived down the street from me" who:

... had a similar problem. She was not overweight, but she was overdeveloped
.... She was almost as much out of step with the kids her age as I Politics
may make strange bedfellows but our social problems in like manner brought
Kathy and me together.

Kathy and Celesta's friendship was short lived as Celesta implies that Kathy engages in a sort of casual prostitution making extra money at her part-time job, and one night Celesta is propositioned by the owner as well. She describes it as "the first foul proposition I'd ever known, complete with an indecent exhibition."⁶⁴ After hearing the story, her sister makes Celesta promise to end the friendship. The theme of sex work amongst Geyer's childhood and teenaged friendships is a recurring one. Her school friend Ellen, described by Geyer as being "more offbeat than even I was," participates in sex work with boys after school. She tells Geyer "'I'd like to work you in, too ... but boys don't like fat girls.'" Geyer ended her friendship with Ellen shortly after, and Ellen moved away after her sex work became public knowledge and she was ostracized. After Geyer left school at the age of 16 and took work in the Dolly Warden Candy Company, she was befriended by Betty. Geyer describes her: "Betty was a prostitute. Unlike my little school chum Ellen, Betty knew how to make her trade pay well. Her purse, which she often showed me, was always filled with large bills." Celesta and Betty's friendship lasted until Celesta left the candy company for other work, and Celesta casts her friendship with Betty as one of gifts of food, "intimate stories," and good advice. Betty encouraged Celesta to "go to school and learn a trade Be a stenographer, Celesta; you'll be a good one and you can earn a good honest living. You might even meet a man, if that's your aim."⁶⁵ Yet Ellen's barb about fat girls being undesirable haunted Geyer, who internalized and repeated it throughout the text. In response to Betty, Geyer responds "What boss could give dictation with a 200-pound dolly on his knee?" The discourse of being an outcast based on corporeality and being sexually unattractive fits with the popular discourses regarding fat women. As Peter Stearns suggests, sexuality was a component of the gender bias in the "misogynistic phase" of American dieting culture that extended from the 1920s to the 1960s making sex appeal and obesity at odds.⁶⁶

For Geyer, her sexuality and sexual experiences prior to joining the sideshow were complicated by the tensions between sex appeal and the obese body. The attention she receives from men is frequently questioned, as Geyer falls into the narrative that makes it impossible to reconcile sexual desirability

and fatness. On a trip to San Francisco, Geyer began a romance with Dave, a man recently separate from his wife, who Geyer falls in love with after a whirlwind romance. Shortly after meeting, Dave asked Geyer to marry him and she recalls, "I couldn't give him an answer because I couldn't believe, although his every action proved his sincerity, that any man would truly fall in love with a fat girl, especially one as fat as I, 275 pounds. Nor could I fend off his love that night and I, without accepting or rejecting his proposal, became his."⁶⁷ The next day, Geyer fled San Francisco — Dave's wife, children, and religion (Judaism) proved to be too much for Geyer to commit to. Although she changed her mind and intended to return, she made a last minute decision to take the train to El Paso where, along with her new friend Ethel, she ended up on a series of dates with a man named Blackie in Tijuana.⁶⁸ Shortly after returning home, she met Frank Geyer and the narrative of "how can he really want a fat girl" continues.⁶⁹ She waited a week to accept Frank's proposal and they were married in early 1925. Her marriage brings new criticism of her body in a way that was not discussed in the text since her elementary school days. She recalls that both family members and strangers made comments on the impossibility of finding Geyer attractive, and these barbs focused in part on their sex life: "Frank would never be able to love me; sex relations with me would be as exciting as intercourse with a can of lard; Frank would never find me for the wrinkles." As evidence of Frank's love and her desirability, Geyer shares her reaction to their wedding night and writes:

Inwardly I glowed. If I could only have gathered the world and all its unkind people into my bedroom, I would have exposed with pride the intimacies of my first wedded night I had an almost insatiable desire to run out into the street and cry out, "Yes, my husband made love to me in deepest ecstasy. He made love to me I'm his body and soul."⁷⁰

Geyer's autobiography also eschews discourses of obese women as incapable of being an object of desire, but that happens largely in relation to her performances on the sideshow. She writes, "The 1939 season was the one in which I had arrived. I was not a pound or so over 500 pounds and quite proud that I had been tagged 'The World's Most Beautiful Fat Lady'." While freak show style often dictated that the impossible be juxtaposed, so one could read the billing as highlighting the impossibility of being beautiful and fat, Geyer suggests that being deemed beautiful is what separated her performance from "the usual freak idea."⁷¹ Performers like the Fat Lady often revealed their bodies and ramped up the sexual aspect of the performance as part of their freak identity, and a key part of many twentieth century extraordinary performances, especially the fat performances, was the display of sexuality. This created a deeply ambivalent reaction as some audience members were drawn in by a simultaneous desire to know/see and to experience repulsion. After all, fat

“I WAS A 555-POUND FREAK”: THE SELF, FREAKERY, AND SEXUALITY
IN CELESTA ‘DOLLY DIMPLES’ GEYER’S DIET OR DIE

women’s bodies spoke to an untamed ravenousness — an unlimited appetite that broke the dominant moral codes. A slender body (and it was assumed a controlled appetite) made up for increased consumption of goods and more open sexual activity.⁷²

As Geyer’s autobiography reveals, audience members were sometimes physical participants in the sexual text of the freak performance. Geyer witnessed Jolly Pearl let a female customer “touch her and feel her body so that the male escort could get an almost first-hand report about the authenticity of her fat.”⁷³ It was, after all, arousing to be able to touch a strange woman in a legitimate setting and could be tantalizing for those who just watched.⁷⁴ As Stullman Dennet argues,

Sex was a powerful component of the performance text of the freak show; spectators imagined sexual intercourse between incongruous partners — the fat woman and the thin man, the bearded woman (who may not after all, be a woman) and her husband — and among couples like Chang and Eng and their wives. Such performances readily inspired images of transgressive sex, ambiguous sex, homosexuality, bisexuality, and group sex, challenging the conventional boundaries between male and female, self and other.⁷⁵

While Geyer’s desirability was something she relished as a sideshow performer, it was not something that she initially accepted. Early in her freak show career, she was prickly with female audience members who asked probing questions about her private life. She recalls:

After the show one night in Illinois, a woman stayed on to talk to me. Very confidentially she whispered, “How does your husband make love to you?” I was shocked and infuriated; I never thought that a woman could be so brash and uncouth.

Returning the shock to her I said, “Why, honey, he waits until I go to the bathroom and then he follows the stream to the exact spot.”

I wasn’t proud of this answer so in reply to the same question in Mobile, Alabama, I was a bit more discreet. To this inquiring Southern Belle I said, “Mother gave my husband a blueprint of my body as a wedding present.”

Another nervy woman, excited with the aspects of my sex life, asked me if Frank was built like a horse.⁷⁶

After these exchanges, Geyer asks Jolly Pearl for advice, and Jolly Pearl suggests that Geyer perform as a single woman saying: “That will end those nasty questions; besides you owe it [to] your public to be a single fat glamour girl.”⁷⁷ While she was upset by some of the probing questions that came from women, her act became driven by her ability to meet heteronormative beauty standards as “The World’s Most Beautiful Fat Lady,” and Geyer was quite proud, if only subtly so, of the male attention she garnered through her performances. Playing

at Coney Island in the “Wotta Fat Family” show, Geyer met film star Clara Bow, who had been dubbed the “It Girl.” Geyer recalls Bow bestowing It Girl status on her as the It Girl of the fat girls.⁷⁸

As a “single fat glamour girl,” the relations between Geyer and her audience seemed to have been changed, or are at least represented differently in the book as solely heterosexual encounters. Male fans drive her narrative of sexual desirability, although she categorizes the men as normal (“a kind handsome fellow named Bert”) and abnormal (“a commercial fisherman” who would share his daily catch trying to hook Geyer). Geyer also recounts in her autobiography crushes that customers had on her, some of whom bought her expensive gifts and different types of food. One such man Geyer describes as a Brooklyn medical doctor who propositioned Geyer after giving her a gift of “pounds and pounds of candy.” Although she brushes aside his invitation for spending one night together, the doctor tried to assure her that his sexual desire was driven by his passion for both her and medicine.⁷⁹ Bert went to great lengths to impress Geyer, regularly bringing her food and buying her expensive gifts, including a crystal necklace for her birthday as well as planning a surprise party for her. For his efforts, Bert was rewarded with a kiss on the cheek, although this does not soften his disappointment upon finding out Geyer is married. According to Geyer, however, they remained lifelong friends.⁸⁰ Some of her admirers crossed the lines of appropriate social interactions. She also saw frotteurists (or “warmers”) in action who were turned on her by performances and rubbed against women in the crowd. Geyer described watching them from her platform:

They did not come directly to me but they practiced their low-down actions before my eyes. They stood around my platform, moving close to women in the audience, making warm body contact with them. Watching me, they would relish the thrill of rubbing against an unsuspecting woman.

Geyer had these men removed from her tent.⁸¹

Geyer’s freak show self provided an opening for her to perform and accept her sexual desirability. Performing her body as a Fat Lady she negotiated a sexual text that framed her identity as an It Girl — a desirable subject — who could and did meet heteronormative standards of beauty and heterosexual desire. In moments, this text fit within standard narratives of fat women as only ridiculously desirable, but Geyer’s autobiography also reveals her challenge to those narratives and her claim to beauty and sexuality as an obese woman.

Conclusion: Truth and Stories

Reading Geyer’s story is not as voyeuristic as one might expect. There are significant chronological jumps, notable absences, and, in places, a sense of deliberate obscuring of details. The autobiography is also marked by internal

"I WAS A 555-POUND FREAK": THE SELF, FREAKERY, AND SEXUALITY
IN CELESTA 'DOLLY DIMPLES' GEYER'S DIET OR DIE

tensions and ambivalences, especially regarding her status as sideshow freak, her fat-ness, and her dieting success. Rather than being limitations of the text, these tensions and ambivalences are particularly significant as both reflections on the making of the self and American culture. Geyer's autobiography is caught in this irresolvable contradiction of being a confession of her fat self (framed using the discourses of addiction), that is simultaneously a source of pride and resistance, and celebratory impulse associated with dramatic weight loss and appearing as a thin, healthy woman. Overall, Geyer's autobiography reveals the subtleties, ambiguities, and complexities of performing the fat female body.

In many ways Geyer's work on the sideshow translated well into her work as a "champion dieter." The ballyhoo of the freak show fit well within the American dieting culture, and authoring her autobiography was part of the transition from one sideshow to another. Ballyhoo might well describe strategies of narrating the self in autobiography — and Geyer's text is a remarkable example of the shifting and elusive nature of life writing. It conceals as much as it reveals and often leaves the reader wondering if what we have taken in was a real or a gaffed performance of a sideshow artist. In reading freak autobiographies in general, and Geyer's in particular, we can begin to discuss how the self (and multiple selves) are strategically performed and represented in perpetual performances in which there are always ambivalences and ambiguities.

Currently, Geyer's story may seem entirely unremarkable given the glut of TV shows such as *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, *The Biggest Loser*, and TLC's *Half Ton* series, which regularly highlight the problem of obesity and celebrate the successes of extreme weight loss. The continuing popularity of the display of such a body points to the ongoing acceptability of this type of story as a narrative of success, but we need to be keenly aware that this narrative makes it difficult to speak of such a body in any other way. Autobiographies like Geyer's reveal the internal tension of creating self and the need to maintain certain cultural conventions. Thus, the source of many of the ambivalences in the text are reflective of the difficulty of representing the obese female body as anything outside of the dominant, highly discriminatory narrative of fat as a problem and source of shame. To a large degree this is the ongoing significance of Geyer's autobiography. The failure of the autobiography to attract a wide audience reveals that her status as an obese fat performer was far more appealing (and profitable) than a sideshow worker turned self-proclaimed diet queen. Hers was a story that tried to fit within the dominant narrative of obesity but undercut it and challenged it in too many places. Thomas King argues, "the truth about stories is that that's all that we are."⁸² If King is correct, and I think he is, then we need to pay close attention to the stories we tell as individuals and as a culture, and be keenly aware of the consequences of our complicity with those stories.

As Geyer's autobiography reveals, there is a multiplicity at work in creating the self and we need to find ways to write, read, and reflect on that diversity of being, because the stories we tell are what we are.

* * *

JANE NICHOLAS is assistant professor in the department of History at Lakehead University.

JANE NICHOLAS est professeure adjointe au département d'histoire de Lakehead University.

Endnotes:

- 1 My thanks to Wendy Mitchinson, Canada Research Chair in Gender and Medicine, and Tracy Penny Light for sponsoring and organizing an opportunity to present an earlier version of this paper at St. Jerome's University/University of Waterloo. Thanks also to the anonymous readers who provided thoughtful and constructive feedback which improved the essay. This paper is part of a SSHRC funded project on the history of freak shows in twentieth century North America.
- 2 Celesta "Dolly Dimples" Geyer, *The Greatest Diet in the World* (Orlando: Chateau Publishing, Inc., 1968); and Celesta "Dolly Dimples" Geyer and Samuel Roen, *Diet or Die: The Dolly Dimples Weight Reducing Plan* (New York: F. Fell, 1968). In *Diet or Die* co-author Samuel Roen is acknowledged, but his entries into the text are minimal, and Geyer only refers to her co-author once at the very end of the book. The book is also written as if Geyer is authoring the text by herself. The significant differences between the texts are the dedications and the inclusion of a foreword in *The Greatest Diet in the World*. *Diet or Die* is dedicated to Marcia Roen, Samuel Roen's wife, and is seemingly written by him. *The Greatest Diet in the World* is "dedicated to all who seek the way, the inspiration, the will and the courage to face their problem of being overweight To those who will turn to a new life and to the determined trust in the power and glory of belief."
- 3 Peter N. Stearns, *Fat History: Bodies and Beauty in the Modern West* (New York: New York University Press, 2002); and Sander L. Gilman, *Fat: A Cultural History of Obesity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008).
- 4 Wendy Mitchinson, "Medicine and Obesity in Canada, 1920–1980," paper presented at the annual meeting of the Canadian Historical Association, Vancouver, British Columbia, 2–4 June 2008.
- 5 For example, see Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco, eds., *Bodies Out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Christopher E. Forth and Ana Carden-Coyne, eds., *Cultures of the Abdomen: Diet, Digestion, and Fat in the Modern World* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Patrick Basham, Gio Gori, and John Luik, *Diet Nation: Exposing the Obesity Crusade* (London: The Social Affairs Unit, 2006); and Michael Gard and Jan Wright, *The Obesity Epidemic: Science, Morality and Ideology* (New York: Routledge, 2005).
- 6 Robert Bogdan, *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); and Rosemarie Garland Thomson, "Introduction," in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, ed. Rosemarie Garland Thomson (New York: New York University Press, 1996).

“I WAS A 555-POUND FREAK”: THE SELF, FREAKERY, AND SEXUALITY
IN CELESTA ‘DOLLY DIMPLES’ GEYER’S DIET OR DIE

- 7 For example, see Leslie Fiedler, *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978); Bogdan, *Freak Show*; Andrea Stullman Dennett, *Weird and Wonderful: The Dime Museum in America* (New York: New York University Press, 1997); Benjamin Reiss, *The Showman and the Slave: Race, Death and Memory in Barnum’s America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001); Roslyn Poignant, *Professional Savages: Captive Lives and Western Spectacle* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004); and Linda Frost, *Never One Nation: Freaks, Savages, and Whiteness in U.S. Popular Culture, 1850–1877* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).
- 8 Much of the literature on twentieth century freak shows focuses on their representation in art, film, and literature. For example, see Rosemary Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); and Rachel Adams, *Sideshow U.S.A.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).
- 9 Hilde Bruch, *Eating Disorders: Obesity, Anorexia Nervosa, and the Person Within* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 112.
- 10 Sondra Solovay and Esther Rothblum, “Introduction,” in *The Fat Studies Reader*, eds. Sondra Solovay, Esther Rothblum, and Marilyn Wann (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 2.
- 11 Marilyn Wann, “Foreword: Fat Studies: An Invitation to Revolution” in *ibid.*, xii, xv.
- 12 Quoted in Bogdan, *Freak Show*, 95.
- 13 On the narrative strategies of freakery, see Rosemarie Garland Thomson, “Introduction” in *Freakery*, 7–8.
- 14 On life writing and sideshows, see Kerry A. Duff, “Biographies of Scale: The Life Writing of Nineteenth-Century ‘Dwarfs’ and ‘Giants’,” (Ph.D. diss., Michigan State University, 2003).
- 15 Liz Stanley, *The autobiographical I: The Theory and Practice of Feminist Autobiography* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), 62.
- 16 Samuel Roen, “‘Diet or Die’: The Story of a Woman Who Lost 430 Pounds,” *Sarasota Herald-Tribune* (17 October 1971).
- 17 The story is discussed in Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *Fasting Girls: The Emergence of Anorexia Nervosa as a Modern Disease* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 253.
- 18 “Carnival Fatso Lost 410 Pounds in 365 Days on 800 Calorie Diet,” *The Milwaukee Journal* (8 August 1955).
- 19 Geyer, *Diet or Die*, 16.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 30, 27.
- 21 Stearns, *Fat History*, 75–6.
- 22 Brumberg, *Fasting Girls*, 234–5 and 250–3. Louis Dublin is often the focus on these discussions. For more on Dublin, including a critique of his findings, see Basham, Gori, and Luik, *Diet Nation*, 36–42. It should be pointed out that malnourishment in children remained a serious concern throughout the first half of the twentieth century.
- 23 Stearns, *Fat History*, 110–14.
- 24 On the Modern Girl, see Modern Girl Around the World Research Group: Tani E. Barlow, Madeline Yue Dong, Uta G. Poiger, Priti Ramamurthy, Lynn M. Thomas, and Alys Even Weinbaum, “The Modern Girl around the World: A Research Agenda and Preliminary Findings,” *Gender and History* 17, no. 2 (August 2005): 245–94. On women’s body culture and dieting, see Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls* (New York: Random House, 1997), 97–104; and Margaret A. Lowe, *Looking Good: College Women and Body Image, 1875–1930* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 140–7.
- 25 Geyer, *Diet or Die*, 217.
- 26 Lowe, *Looking Good*, 147.

- 27 On this point in postwar Canada, see Franca Iacovetta and Valerie J. Korinek, “Jell-O Salads, One-Stop Shopping, and Maria the Homemaker: The Gender Politics of Food” in *Sisters or Strangers? Immigrant, Ethnic, and Racialized Women in Canadian History*, eds. Marlene Epp, Franca Iacovetta, and Frances Swyripa (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004). The quote is from page 190. The blandness of her diet combined with the use of gelatine moulds speaks to the shift. As Iacovetta and Korinek point out, postwar North American cuisine often “bastardized” ethnic foods making them less spicy and, ultimately, creating a homogenized mainstream food culture. Geyer’s recipes, including “Spiced Beets” and “Dolly’s Spanish Rice” reflect this trend.
- 28 Geyer, *Diet or Die*, 212–3 and 222.
- 29 *Ibid.*, 107.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 169–74.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 13.
- 32 Trysh Travis, *The Language of the Heart: A Cultural History of the Recovery Movement from Alcoholics Anonymous to Oprah Winfrey* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 46–7 and 144–5; and Stearns, *Fat History*, 110. In newspaper articles that discussed Geyer’s weight loss and later her book, Geyer was credited with coining the term “foodolic.” She was quoted saying, “It portrays the person hooked on food as ‘alcoholic’ describes the person hooked on drink.” For example, see Connie Gee, “From 555 Pounds to 154 — Lost in A Year,” *Miami News* (15 June 1965), 15; and Sam Roen, “‘Diet or Die,’” 57.
- 33 Steven Starker, *Oracle at the Supermarket: The American Preoccupation with Self-Help Books* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1989), 93–101.
- 34 Geyer, *Diet or Die*, front inside cover.
- 35 Stearns, *Fat History*, 163. The USDA currently recommends that adult women consume between 1,600 and 2,400 calories per day, depending on age and activity level. For the full breakdown see http://www.mypyramid.gov/downloads/MyPyramid_Food_Intake_Patterns.pdf#xml=http://65.216.150.153/texis/search/pdfhi.txt?query=calorie&pr=MyPyramid&rdepth=0&sufts=2&order=r&cq=&id=4bc8ced3c.
- 36 Geyer, *Diet or Die*, 223–6.
- 37 Stearns, *Fat History*, 122. The religious discourse in the book is significant. In the foreword to *The Greatest Diet in the World*, Geyer writes, “First, you must believe ... you must have faith ... conviction. You will find your peace of mind in His hands and the courage to conquer your problem of obesity will come to you.” Geyer, *The Greatest Diet in the World*, 11.
- 38 Geyer, *Diet or Die*, 24.
- 39 For example, see the description in *ibid.*, 150–2.
- 40 Kathleen LeBesco, *Revolting Bodies: The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004), 16.
- 41 Gilman, *Fat*, 6–7.
- 42 For a scholarly discussion of the debates over obesity as disability, see Sondra Solovay, *Tipping the Scales of Justice: Fighting Weight-Based Discrimination* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2000); and April Herndon, “Disparate but Disabled: Fat Embodiment and Disability Studies” *NWSA Journal* 14, no. 3 (Autumn 2002): 120–37.
- 43 Geyer, *Diet or Die*, 118.
- 44 *Ibid.*, 120.
- 45 *Ibid.*, 122–3.
- 46 Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 75–8. For an illuminating single account of the relationship between physicians and performers, see Joanne Martell, *Millie-Christine: Fearfully and Wonderfully Made* (Winston-Salem, NC: John F. Blair, Publisher, 2000).
- 47 Geyer, *Diet or Die*, 195, 197.
- 48 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990, 2006), xv.

"I WAS A 555-POUND FREAK": THE SELF, FREAKERY, AND SEXUALITY
IN CELESTA 'DOLLY DIMPLES' GEYER'S DIET OR DIE

- 49 Geyer, *Diet or Die*, 100–1.
- 50 Ibid., 102.
- 51 Ibid., 57.
- 52 Ibid., 107.
- 53 Ibid., 113.
- 54 Ibid., 106.
- 55 Andrea Stullman Dennett, "The Dime Museum Freak Show Reconfigured as Talk Show" in *Freakery*, 323.
- 56 Geyer, *Diet or Die*, 189–90.
- 57 Tanfer Emin, "Freaks and Geeks: Coney Island Sideshow Performers and Long Island Eugenicists, 1910–1935." *Long Island Historical Journal* 14, no. 1–2 (Fall/Spring 2002): 1–14.
- 58 Geyer, *Diet or Die*, 13.
- 59 Ibid., 162.
- 60 Ibid.
- 61 Duff, "Biographies of Scale," 18–19.
- 62 Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 42–3.
- 63 Emin, "Freaks and Geeks."
- 64 Geyer, *Diet or Die*, 38, 39.
- 65 Ibid., 44, 45 .
- 66 Stearns, *Fat History*, 82–3.
- 67 Geyer, *Diet or Die*, 62.
- 68 Ibid., 65–9.
- 69 Ibid., 73.
- 70 Ibid., 88.
- 71 Ibid., 160.
- 72 Stearns, *Fat History*, 94.
- 73 Geyer, *Diet or Die*, 105.
- 74 Stullman Dennett, "The Dime Museum Freak Show," 323.
- 75 Ibid., 322–3.
- 76 Geyer, *Diet or Die*, 114.
- 77 Ibid., 115.
- 78 Ibid., 129. Elinor Glynn coined the term "It" to describe Clara Bow, so it is apt that Bow herself bestowed the title on Geyer. "It" was a popular interpretation of Sigmund Freud's id and indicated "an undefinable voltage of openly sexual energy." Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1995), 47.
- 79 Geyer, *Diet or Die*, 130.
- 80 Ibid., 132.
- 81 Ibid., 130.
- 82 Thomas King, *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, Inc., 2003), 2.