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To cite this article: Cathlin Bryn Goulding (2021) Into the odditorium: A pedagogy of the body at *Ripley's Believe It or Not!* and in popular media, *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy*, 18:2, 101-118, DOI: [10.1080/15505170.2021.1927263](https://doi.org/10.1080/15505170.2021.1927263)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15505170.2021.1927263>



Published online: 26 Oct 2021.



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Into the odditorium: A pedagogy of the body at *Ripley's Believe It or Not!* and in popular media

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ABSTRACT

For the 1933 World's Fair in Chicago, a cartoonist named Robert Ripley would create his first odditorium, a public archive of his personal collection of curiosities. While Ripley was not the first to capitalize on the display of “exotic” and “monstrous” curios, his odditoriums illuminate pervasive ideas about human difference circulating in public discourse in the early twentieth century. The odditorium and the freak show are seemingly anachronistic phenomena, but the forums and yearnings for “oddities” still surface in popular culture today: the proliferation of podcasts that detail the lives of serial killers and cult leaders, the massive audiences drawn to viewing cystic acne popped in YouTube videos, and youth makeup artists who cover and uncover dermatological conditions with myriad skincare products and makeup in self-produced video tutorials. This paper will investigate odditoriums as a specific—and troubling—form of public pedagogy, shifting between readings of *Ripley's Believe It or Not!* in New York's Times Square and the role of body-as-mannequin and haptic simulation in contemporary sites of popular learning.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 4 May 2021
Accepted 4 May 2021

Introduction

During the 1933 World's Fair in Chicago, the cartoonist Robert Ripley premiered his first odditorium, a public exhibition of his private collection of curiosities. For a forty-cent price of admission, visitors could see displays of medieval torture devices, the outlaw Jesse James' first gun, a man who puffed cigarettes and inflated balloons through his eye socket, among hundreds of other objects (Bogdan, 2014; Thompson, 2013).

Robert Ripley's odditorium was a live-action execution of his popular syndicated newspaper column, *Believe it or Not!* Ripley began his career as a sports cartoonist for *The New York Globe*. During breaks in the sports season, he struggled to generate new content for the paper. On a whim, he pitched a new column called *Champs and Chumps*. It began as an assemblage of athletes' unusual talents and records. S.D. See, for instance,

could leap 100 yards in 11 seconds. J.M. Barnett jumped rope 11,810 times in approximately four hours (Thompson, 2013). As the column evolved, Ripley featured cartoons of notable athletic records, people with unusual talents, tidbits from travels through Asia, and arcane facts. Eventually, his motley grab-bag of a newspaper feature would become a lucrative franchise of books, radio and television shows, and, most markedly, brick-and-mortar odditoriums located throughout the world.

Yet Ripley was hardly the first to capitalize on the display of the curious and the odd. Enlightenment-era *wunderkammern*—or “cabinets of curiosity”—were one of the earliest iterations of the odditorium. Showcases for the elite class, *wunderkammern* were large drawing rooms chock-full of indiscriminately organized objects (Dettmers, 2008; Impey & MacGregor, 2013; Weschler, 1996). As the disciplines of science evolved, wonder cabinets fell out of favor and soon the natural history and ethnology museums took their place. No longer vested in the power of divination or wonder, these formal institutions sought to categorize and order human and natural life. Building these collections relied on violent pillage and extraction of resources during imperial conquests. Collectors wrenched artifacts from their colonies and rehoused them in the museum as trophies of empire-building. Categories that served to classify plants and animals were readily deployed to create fictive hierarchies based on race and nationality, thereby severing the civilized from the savage (Procter, 2020).

Though the museum would hold its prominent place in the service of exhibiting scientific and civilizational progress, the freak show would have its heyday. From approximately 1840-1940, displays of oddities emerged in the form of dime museums, circuses, and “museums” like that of P.T. Barnum (Bogdan, 2014). While marketed as a spiritual and educational experience, the freak show was ultimately a profit-seeking, entertainment enterprise (Thomson, 1996). Persons with supposed behavioral, cultural, or physical differences were unabashedly put on display: Conjoined twins, the irregularly pigmented, the legless, the armless, the bearded woman, the less “civilized,” the very tall, and the very short.

Odditoriums highlight pervasive ideas about human difference circulating in public discourse in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Disabilities scholarship (Bogdan, 2012, 2014; Sandell et al., 2005; Thomson, 1996, 2017) has rehabilitated an examination of the sideshow, circus, and public spectacles of an array of bodily forms. Robert Bogdan’s (2012) *Picturing Disability: Beggar, Freak, Citizen and Other Photographic Rhetoric* draws from an archival study of freakshow artifacts and portraits sold by enterprising performers to their avid audiences. In his analysis, freakdom is not a matter of physiology or a condition of being. Reluctant to cast the freak as a victim, Bogdan sees them as savvy entrepreneurs who

understood how to capitalize on their bodies for an eager public. Critically, Bogdan (2014) explains that the odd or the freakish is “a way of thinking about and presenting people” (p. 24). In a theoretical analysis of the freakshow’s appeal, historian Rosemary Thomson (2017) explains that the freakshow was part and parcel of the American project of “self-making.” The collective action of watching the freak was a skill-building experience, one that trained spectators to see difference as deviance in the social sphere and within the self.

Odditorium as public pedagogy

Although the odditorium and the freak show are seemingly anachronistic phenomena, the forums and yearnings for “oddities” still surface in popular culture today. The odditorium resurfaces in the proliferation of podcasts that detail the lives of serial killers and cult leaders, the massive audiences drawn to viewing cystic acne popped in YouTube videos, and the makeup artists who cover and uncover dermatological conditions with myriad skincare products and makeup. Odditoriums are a specific—and troubling—form of public pedagogy (Sandlin et al., 2010, 2011), positioning visitors as learner-spectator of the human body. The learner-as-spectator revolves around an illusory affiliation between viewer and the exhibited. To learn the body as a spectator is to take up, unquestioningly, the stance that some of us are normal and others are unchangeably deviant (Adams, 2001, p. 6). Ripley’s odditorium deploys museological techniques—the mannequin, visitor-artifact interaction, and object labels—to teach such ideas about what kinds of bodies and persons are normal and who, alternatively, is reduced to freakish spectacle. The odditorium’s draw is both embraced and upended by today’s YouTubers, social media influencers, and podcasters. In these popular forms of media, creators represent their bodies and others not as a spectacle but as a vessel for identification. These new forms of media unsettle the freak-spectator paradigm, tentatively embracing an ethics of self-exposure, anxiety release, and kinship.

In this article, I describe Ripley’s quest to construct a museum of human oddities and, through visual data and field observations (Banks, 2018; Spencer, 2010), analyze how one odditorium works to place visitors as learner and spectator of the body. Drawing on scholarship from disability studies (Dettmers, 2008; Weschler, 1996), I touch on three kinds of non-normative bodies presented in Ripley’s odditorium—the “freakish” body, the “unruly” body, and the “pained” body. For each of these formulations of body pedagogy in the odditorium, I pair a reading of how these bodies have been translated into popular media today.

The body as pedagogy in the odditorium

Like Guy Fieri's much-lampooned restaurant and Madame Tussauds' unnerving parade of celebrity wax effigies, *Ripley's Believe it or Not!* is a tourist fixture in New York City's Times Square. Vest-clad workers, playing the modern-day version of the hustling showman, stand outside the odditorium's door, beckoning the streetwalkers into its bulb-lit doors. Currently, there are 27 of Ripley's odditoriums operating throughout the world. The New York City location originally opened in 1957, shuttering its doors in 1972. According to a *New York Times* review (Rothstein, 2007), the 1970s-era, gritty Times Square became "too much like the shadowy world of extravagant desire and freakishness portrayed within" (para. 6). The renovated odditorium opened in 2007, allied with the bright commercialization of midtown Manhattan. In a revitalized, Disneylandified cityscape, this odditorium would be a comfortable "exception to the surroundings rather than extension to it" (Rothstein, 2007, para. 6). In other words, the odditorium offered an entrée into the abnormal—a careful economic calibration—conveying to visitors that, indeed, they are entering into the zone of the weird (Figure 1).

While I have lived in New York city for some years now, it has never occurred to me to make *Ripley's Believe it or Not!* a destination. It was a garish tourist trap, unenticing to even the most gullible of passersby let alone a skeptical resident. However, a post-Thanksgiving walk through Times Square with visiting family drew me reluctantly into its environs



Figure 1. The decorative apex of Ripley's Believe it or Not! in New York City's Times Square.

(Ripley's was, after all, one of the few establishments open on the holiday). In subsequent data collection-driven visits to the site, most subsidized by Groupon specials, my snobbery soon gave way to attentiveness. I walked through exhibits organized by exclamation: *Look at this statue of an enormously tall man! Look at this taxidermy of a six-legged cow!*

During the course of this inquiry, I soon realized that cultural consumers like myself had become accustomed to the slick curations of the contemporary museum. In these sites, the exhibits are self-aware, use exacting academic descriptors, and give appropriate levels of context. In turn, the odditorium's dated décor, lack of curatorial statements, and disturbingly boorish proffering of artifacts looted during colonial conquests, laid bare something critical to me as a researcher. The odditorium conveyed the pedagogical immoderations in addressing human difference within the public sphere. The obviate shock-value launched productive, underexamined connections to the present. A glimpse in the odditorium's trick mirror exposed the historical through-line, the still-active tactics of teaching and learning the body.

Freakish bodies

The display of the “deformed” body in *Ripley's Believe it or Not!* is achieved through simulacra. Stunted and malformed bodies are exactly imitated in wax figurines. Near the odditorium's entrance, decapitated wax heads perch in glass cases. Avelino Perez Matos of Baracoa, Cuba—the “Cuban Eye-Popper,” as the signage indicates—“could dislocate his eyes out of their sockets at will.” In the case adjacent, the “Blue Faced Man,” is Ching Foo of Shaanqix, China. Foo is described as an “ordinary man” who was “born with a blue face and white hair.” Above eye level, Grace McDaniels' moniker is the “Mule-Faced Woman.” Her skin condition remains unnamed. However, the label notes that she had “numerous proposals of marriage.” Accompanied by flashy showman-like monikers, the bodyless heads are reduced to their disfigurements, which is one of the, as Rosemarie Garland Thomson (2017) notes, “cardinal [principles] of freakdom” (p. 59). The enticement, and thus the absorption by the learner, is cultivated through the attention to details, such as the rounded white bulge of the eye socket or the shock of electric blue (Figure 2).

Wax mannequins, a non-human yet human approximation, are a storied pedagogical tradition from the 19th and early 20th centuries. The mannequin appeared in both storefronts and museums alike, effective in teaching both compartment of form and the fashions of the times. Wax figurines became a staple of museum exhibitions, replacing the usual taxonomic displays of artifacts. The dioramas, which incorporated elaborate clothes



Figure 2. Wax figurine of Avelino Perez Matos of Baracoa, Cuba—the “Cuban Eye-Popper.”

and backdrops, provided scenes and contexts for viewers to see the body in action and readily access different times and spaces (Sandberg, 2003). Wax figurines privileged a European representation of the colonized “Other,” a convention that is being re-thought in some museum spaces today (*Old New York Diorama*, n.d.). Wax replicas of the body were specialized, intricately-rendered educational tools (often molded from real patients), used in the service of training future doctors. Medical students relied on wax models to absorb basic anatomy and to diagnose pathological changes in the body. Malleable and clammy-textured, wax was an ideal material to represent the disorders of the skin and “deformities” like cleft lips (Alberti, 2009). These anatomical models were not always reserved for medical education, however, and were displayed in medical museums for the general public’s entertainment and engagement (Alberti, 2011). Wax models are a precedent to today’s popular YouTube channels and videos that give a viewers a similarly haptic educational experience.

The pimple poppers

Contemporary popular culture expresses an ambivalent attitude toward dermatological conditions: Alleged disfigurements of one’s face and body are both embraced and concealed. In the parlance of self-care, people are fundamentally enhanced through skincare regimens and Botox injections. In this line of thinking, a consumption and application of the right merchandise should not only improve a person’s physical appearance, but also contribute to a growing knowledge of the self (Tolentino, 2020). In tune with the careful balance of marketing and self-love, social media influencers touch on painful moments of exclusion, confidence, and the struggle to be at home in a body—all while selling goods and services. Makeup tutorial videos—a genre on YouTube and other social media platforms—often

show bare-faced young people with acne poised with confidence and determination. In these tutorials, a pedagogy of the body consists of the protocols and products that promise such sanguine optimization.

A popular makeup artist on YouTube, Taylor Wynn, creates videos primarily on makeup and skincare focusing on her long-time struggle with acne. Showing her face without foundation, she explains that she has learned to “embrace the skin [she] is in now” (Wynn, 2016, 00:46) and urges her viewers to trust that their skin and outside appearance does not define them. Beginning in a barefaced moment of vulnerability, Wynn proceeds to brush on a layer of foundation. Crevices, red spots, and eruptions flatten into monochrome. A swirl of bronzer deepens the cheekbones. Painterly swipes of eyeshadow accent an impeccable, smooth visage. A scan of Wynn’s video uploads offers a long-time marketing tactic: a side-by-side image of her plain, makeup-free face and her face after the intervention of makeup. The educational message here is how to discipline bodily abnormalities into a blank, suave perfection.

In another case, the hugely popular videos of dermatologist Dr. Sandra Lee, otherwise known as Dr. Pimple Popper, borrows flagrant displays of the grotesque from the odditorium. As of the time of this writing, Lee has a YouTube following of 7 million people. Lee’s popularity has been achieved through a seemingly bottomless production of videos showcasing her masterful extraction of cysts, tumors, blackheads, and whiteheads from patients’ skin. While Dr. Lee situates her videos within the framework of self-help, viewers are perhaps less drawn to her narrative of improvement than to the companionship offered by the videos. In a video welcoming viewers to her channel, Lee (2018) explains, “I think one of the main reasons people enjoy watching these videos is because they’re sort of satisfying to them, they’re relaxing to them” (1:22). Watching a needle plunge into the swell of a sebum-filled cyst may not seem be the most tranquil way to spend a Sunday afternoon. Yet viewers have responded strongly, if not always jubilantly.

YouTubers post reaction videos to Dr. Lee’s popping videos—faces contorting in disgust, eyebrows raising in shock, and ecstatic exclamations of joy. In popping a cyst or lipoma, Lee—and by extension her audiences—extinguish the shame that attends one’s own deformities. While the affective responses do run the gamut, the popping of a pimple appears generally accepted as a restorative move. As Lee (2018) explains, “We’re changing lives; we’re fixing things in people that effect their personality, their emotional wellbeing, we’re helping to make them better” (2:22). The videos’ pedagogy lies in Lee’s calm, demonstrative moves and her total attention on her patient. Spectators are lead through the tension that precedes the pop and the volcanic burst of the pimple. As Lee’s fingers press into the

punctured cyst, sebum and bacteria invariably discharging, a collective relief discharges. *If you pop the pimple*, Lee's video instructs, *you, too, can partake in a moment of liberation*.

Scholars like Kathy Davis (1997) agree that people opt into cosmetic surgeries offered by physicians like Lee because they are enticed by the promise of self-improvement and, more crucially, of becoming closer to a presumably authentic self. In interviews with women who have undergone elective cosmetic surgery, Davis found that women saw their operations as an “intervention in identity...[reducing] the distance between the internal and external so that others could see them as they saw themselves” (p. 31). In *Ripley's Believe it or Not!*, the wax mannequins display conditions of the skin and the body in their most heightened and hyper-visible forms. The inanimate wax heads, with their eerie shine, inflamed lips, and blueish tints, are sealed in their glass cases, indicating that the malformed body is ultimately unfixable. To the contrary, a body that undergoes surgery is vibrantly mutable. Far from being an object of spectatorship, these patients actively choose to use their bodies “as a site for action and protest rather than as an object of discipline and normalization” (Davis, 1997, p. 33). These forms of popular pedagogy of the body are not without tensions. Transforming the body, be it through cyst removal or careful sweeps of flesh-colored makeup to the skin, promises restoration and health to the unmoored, defective self. But ultimately the intervention is a fruitless endeavor, as the perfect bodily form can never be acquired. As Huff (2001) writes, a “perfectly docile body can only be approached, never actually attained, making the struggle for physical self-control an unending battle” (p. 49) (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Wax bust of Grace McDaniels, the “Mule-Faced Woman,” at Ripley's Believe it or Not!

Unruly bodies

In the odditorium, the body is excessive. It is a boundless source of amazement. The contortionist bends their lithe body and hovers over tables, propped up only by thin metal poles. The body is the exotic, rarefied fantasy of the colonizer. A full-sized mannequin of a Padaung woman of Myanmar invites visitors to sit beside her, her neck stretched through the gradual additions of metal coils. Bodies serve as anonymous stand-ins for absorption of the cultures outside of North America or Europe. Less invested in the proper educational distance that museums require of visitors, the odditorium requests the audience to lean-in, to be as close as possible to its mannequin-rendered fakery. In this respect, the odditorium walks the tenuous line between amusement and education, legitimizing its purpose through anthropological gestures and medical diagnoses. Through the odditorium's gaze, the body is unruly, a disruptive excess that reflects boundlessness, irrationality, and a lack of coherence (Erevelles, 2000). It takes up space.

The repugnantly excessive body is poignantly expressed in *Ripley's Believe it or Not!* through the figure of Walter Hudson. In 1947, Hudson weighed 1,200 pounds and was confined to his home in New York City. When he died at age 47 of a heart attack in his Hempstead, New York home, his body was removed by forklift. In the odditorium, a mannequin of Hudson is hanging aloft, half-dressed, spinning like ballerina in a music box. His hair is messily combed. He dons only a cloth diaper, appearing like a baby. Adjacent to his form hangs a tray of food awaiting his consumption: glasses of cola soda, a dozen eggs, several hamburgers, squeeze bottles of ketchup and mustard. Hudson's mannequin is mournful, pathetic. Yet, his airborne station in the odditorium's atrium is magnificent and kingly. The odditorium exploits the excessive body while exalting it (Figure 4).

The messages relayed through Hudson's mannequin is premised on ideas about body weight that have circulated since the 19th and early 20th centuries. The civilizing of the body, particularly the female body, was achieved through dieting and weight loss (Farrell, 2009). Rationality and self-control, so the discourse of the time intoned, could tame the unruly body. The science of the human body—which categorized the “types” that could reflect a correct social order—emerged, tellingly, with the emancipation of Black Americans in the aftermath of the U.S. Civil War and the influx of new immigrants into the United States (Farrell, 2009, p. 917). Thinness was yet another category to demarcate racial superiority and quarantine the “contamination” of society by non-whites. The overweight body, as the odditorium's spinning mannequin imparts, is out of control; it is pitiable, irrational, and over-abundant.



Figure 4. Mannequin of Walter Hudson in Ripley’s Believe it or Not!

The stretched body

More recently, models and influencers have utilized social media to portray a very different vision of the body—a body that displays traces of growth, lived history, and imperfections. Deemed a “plus-sized” model, Ashley Graham often sardonically un.masks the real-workings of the fashion industry, showing un-retouched photographs of her body on fashion shoots. Taking a cue from influencers like Graham and a widespread #bodypositivity movement, the corporations have followed suit. Clothing retailers like Target and Aerie have opted to not Photoshop their models’ bodies. In their photographs selling underwear and swimsuits—though certainly aligning with many markers of acceptable beauty—the ripples of the skin are not wiped away. The models are, unsurprisingly, as satisfied and demure in the clothing product as they ever were. But in these photos, the skin stretches. *The skin will hold*, the photos seem to say, *the skin will show the marks of its container*.

Pained bodies

In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault (2012) wrote of the executions conducted in the public square, a spectacle that served a political purpose: Instill enough fear within the polity so that their transgressions of law and order would be minimized. In odditorium, the instructional value of



Figure 5. A “pillory collar” torture device, overlaid by a hologram in an exhibit at Ripley’s Believe it or Not!

the pained body lies in its ability to detach the spectator from the body-in-pain, ultimately re-framing political and social punishment as an anachronistic tactic of the past. Hyper-realistic displays of torture and bodies-in-pain position visitors as distanced spectators or as faintly empathic to the plight of the punished; if anything, the body-in-pain is intended to inspire amazement. Ripley’s odditorium offers a series of quasi-benign interactions with torture instruments. Visitors can, for instance, pose for photos in a stockade or giddily turn on the shock of the electric chair (Figure 5).

At the odditorium, the pedagogy of the body lies in its verisimilitude. One of the mannequins is wrapped around a torture instrument called the “Hellfire Torture Chimney,” the face contorted in agony. In China, circa 1200 BC, the label tells us, “lying was considered a capital crime. As punishment, convicted liars were stripped, chained to a metal stack, and slow roasted—just short of death. Believe It or Not!” In another exhibit, visitors must lean into a shadowy cabinet. A closer look reveals, irreverently, a “revealing neckline,” or a “pillory collar,” used in 17th century Germany to as a punishment for dress code violations and morally-suspect unmarried women. The inscription on the collar reads, “This virgins ribbon is a great disgrace.” In other exhibits, the pained body is one that can overcome significant obstacles or perform miraculous feats. In a fireplace inside of the odditorium, a pair of plastic feet walk over a series of coals. A recreation of Kuda Bux, an Indian mystic who walked—two times—over a 20-foot-long bed of coals with a reported temperature of 1400 degrees Fahrenheit.

The murdered body

In 2016, two female comedians—Georgia Hardstark and Karen Kilgariff—started a podcast called, *My Favorite Murder*. During each episode, both hosts select a “favorite murder.” The show’s title is a cheeky reference to the comedians shared love of the true crime genre. In their hour-long show, Hardstark and Kilgariff retell a murder’s basic facts, the conundrums of homicide detectives, and the eventual resolve of the investigation. The hosts have a casual approach to their showcases of murders infamous and lesser-known, drawing their sources loosely from the true crime’s world myriad sources, from 1980s-era TV shows to Lifetime Channel’s latest dramatizations. Their podcast’s appeal lies in the easy, funny rapport between the two hosts, admittedly lost in the transcriptions here. The following is short segment from the first episode of the podcast, which conveys the hosts’ style and aims:

KAREN: Let’s just relax into what we’re about to do which is our new podcast, *My Favorite Murder*.

GEORGIA: Let’s get cozy and comfy and you can cuddle up you talk about murder.

KAREN: Talk about the thing that makes you feel most romantic: murder

GEORGIA: We got a fire lit, we’re having some hot cocoa.

KAREN: I’m swirling a brandy around over my head...No, I love this topic.

GEORGIA: I do, too.

KAREN: That’s why we’re friends.

GEORGIA: We’ve talked about this for a long time about true crime and what our favorite ones are because that sounds creepy but—

KAREN: That’s who we are. (Kilgariff & Hardstark, 2016, 1:41)

My Favorite Murder’s educational allure is evident in these initial conversations, the casual and cozy introductions that precede acknowledging the full range of hellish possibilities: Being snatched by a roving van while on a nighttime stroll, torture and detainment in a soundproof basement, for one; or, the asphyxiated body buried in a desert canyon while friends and families haplessly search. The learning is primarily about contemplating and preventing harm against the female body and psyche. In an article for *The Atlantic Monthly*, Andrea Marks (2017) observes the podcast gives “advice for survival and self-care and by using comedy to deflate the scariness of these topics” (para. 9). By addressing the most taboo topics, Marks explains, the hosts open the door for discussion and connection with others on mental health, a finding supported by research on the podcast’s fanbase (Pavelko & Myrick, 2020). In the transcription below, Kilgariff and Hardstark talk about the ordinary, day-to-day fears of living with the fear of being murdered:

GEORGIA: I'm also big on like anything could happen at any moment, you'll never know about it. I don't sit near a window at a restaurant because a car's going to come careening through the f*ing window and kill me. So that s*t to me is like tell me everything I can avoid it.

KAREN: That's what all of this is really. I just want to collect information and hear theories and stories so that I can be braced so that when I see the weird—that the one thing is out of the knife block, I'm ready.

GEORGIA: Totally, like why is there an open soda can right there?

KAREN: I don't drink Pepsi Lite?

GEORGIA: No, no. Also, I feel like a law of physics is that the more you know about something the less likely it's going to happen to you. You know what I mean? I think that's got no bearing in science.

KAREN: It's not scientific. It's spiritual...(Kilgariff & Hardstark, 2016, 10:04)

While this example speaks to a fear of returning home and seeing objects out of place, the hosts often describe far more direct, visceral stories of bodily harm. In one episode (Kilgariff & Hardstark, 2018), Kilgariff tells the harrowing story of a woman named Teka Adams. In 2009, Adams was nine-months pregnant and living on the streets in Washington, D.C. She is shoved into a car, kidnapped under the guise of receiving free baby clothes and diapers. Her female kidnapper holds her for multiple days in an apartment, eventually using rudimentary tools to cut Adams' womb open to take her baby. Adams miraculously escapes from her abductor. And she lives to tell the tale.

Kilgariff's telling is, as she warns, not for the "squeamish." As a semi-squeamish listener, I roiled at each bloody stab, each heart-thumping footstep of Adams as she struggles from her captor. The auditory experience, in particular, lent itself to transmuting Adams' body into my own. I felt a propulsive, sickening sensation that moved from my earbuds into my stomach. As in the case of most episodes of *My Favorite Murder*, a lesson is in order after great bodily harm. In the following passage, Kilgariff talks about the aftermath of the case:

KAREN: And this is what Teka said, 'I survived because I was coming to a point in my life where I started to love myself and respect myself and cherish life. And I survived because of God and my support system. I know a lot of people love me and I know that God loves me and, like they say, God looks after babies and fools and I had a baby and I was a fool.' And then she goes, 'Yep.'

GEORGIA: Is she crying when she says all this?

KAREN: She doesn't really cry that much in this. I cried the whole f*ing time—I'm crying now. And when she gives the speech at the end she just says that she's been

through everything. And now here she is wearing this f*ng rad blue shirt, looking gorgeous. It's so crazy.

GEORGIA: That's f*ng gnarly. (Kilgariff & Hardstark, 2018, 51:36-52:27)

At the end of her narration, Kilgariff shares that Teka and her family now live in an apartment in Washington, D.C. "And that is," Kilgariff says, "Teka Adams' story of survival." (Kilgariff & Hardstark, 2018, 52:38-52:41). The podcasters tell stories that, for the most part, vividly describe violence against the female body and, in framing them as "survival," provision an auditory salve.

In the wake of *My Favorite Murder's* popularity, critiques of the broader genre of true crime podcasts, a field dominated by white women, have surfaced. Critics have commented on Kilgariff and Hardstark's emphasis on the heroic efforts of law enforcement and their underlying faith in the justice system, which has had detrimental effects on the criminalization of Black men, to say the least (DenHoed, 2019). Despite these appraisals, the show has undoubtedly resonated with the fears of women and femmes.

In my own thinking, the female hosted true crime podcast highlights a pedagogical failure in Ripley's odditorium. In *Ripley's Believe it or Not!*, the distanced simulations of a body in pain centers the learner as a spectator. Alternatively, in *My Favorite Murder*, there is a similar attempt to capture the body in pain. The show filters the body's pain through the voices of the two women, descriptions tinged with wryness, fear, and sadness, that entangle the listener into a kinship. The felt expressions of a body in pain reconstitute the relationship between freak and spectator to victim and witness. The podcasters breathe deeply when the body is wrecked. Their voices crack when reading the words of survival.

Conclusion

Ripley's Believe it or Not!'s odditorium is artifact of earlier times and spaces: In the odditorium, visitors recall the well-thumbed, thick books of world records that marked many 1980s-era childhoods. *Ripley's* thoroughfares mimic the colorful blaze of the arcade and circus. The colonialist desire to seize the artifacts and the persons deemed conquerable and exploitable. Today, too, audiences can see the imprint of Robert Ripley's odditorium. It surfaces in the collective intake of the face and body on social media. Audiences, united in their spectatorship of the weird and bizarre, take comfort in their relative normality. What is missing, of course, is a challenge to our role as spectators, an incitement to question our own desires to look, to point at, and delineate. What might it look like to shift our stances from looking to reflexivity?

The curious state of spectatorship within the odditorium is the dual, often contradictory impulses at work: repulsion and identification. The question is whether visitors can recondition beyond playing a constituted role as spectators and, instead, shift to a more critical engagement with these sites. Newer forms of odditoriums reconstitute spectatorship and formulate a different kind of learning. The “monstrosity” of the body—once an object to be watched and marveled—shifts to what cultural theorist Sara Ahmed (2013) calls an affective “stickiness.” When pain is sticky, it does not become an act of watchfulness. Instead, to see the other’s pain is to engage in relief and release from the anxiety of imperfection, the daily wear-down of worry.

Most surprisingly, the odditorium’s pedagogical extremes find relief in the women’s bathroom. On one of my sojourns, I landed inside the bathroom at *Ripley’s Believe it or Not!* The decor reminded me of a shopping mall food court of yesteryear, the stalls bold geometric slices of yellow, red, and blue. I washed my hands and stared at myself in the mirror. Suddenly, a projected image of an elderly gentleman wandered into the mirror. Like a grouchy neighbor in a comedy sitcom, he groaned. He is, I thought, upset at the conditions in the bathroom. He smoked a cigar. *There is no toilet paper in this restroom, I imagine he must be saying. This whole place stinks.* The motion detector glitched as I stood, arrested, in front of the mirror. He disappeared and reappeared. He grumbled and frowned at me. It was, I realized, one of the only occasions in this odditorium in which the body spoke back (Figure 6).



Figure 6. The author and projected video of man in the bathroom mirror at Ripley’s Believe it or Not!

The man and I mutually confronted our aches and pains, our disgruntled temperaments. I, too, had much to complain about. The odditorium, as Rachel Adams (2001) writes, “are places where unlikely individuals come together to contemplate the stranger within and the stranger without” (p. 228). While visitors come to the odditorium with the desire to see the freak in others, Adams explains, they are unseated by the “shock of recognition as the bodies on stage remind them of their own tenuous grasp on normality” (p. 228). Perhaps in this moment of mutual recognition, when one body speaks and the other listens, the odditorium’s pedagogy was cautiously transformational. In the mirror’s neon glitch, we gazed at each other, our reflections enmeshed, as though asking each other: *My body hurts, does yours?*

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