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DISABLED WOMEN ON *SATURDAY NIGHT LIVE*: IDEOLOGICAL
CONSTRUCTIONS AND CULTURAL CONTRADICTIONS

by

Kristen Ann Hungerford

A Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Major: Communication

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated in the loving memory of my father, James Case Hungerford (1952-2014), an educator who “spent every day perfecting every child’s history.” Your love for teaching and administrating lives on through me, your son and your wife – a family of educators.

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Abstract

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This study examines representations of women with disabilities in sketch comedy. Previous scholarship on this topic has found disabled women figures in popular culture to be represented through a trope of otherness that situates their bodies as incomplete, defective, and lacking value. Typically, representations of disabled persons reinforce their corporeal differences and deviances. As a popular culture artifact, *Saturday Night Live (SNL)* provides a platform for representations of disability. My study is situated within the field of critical disability studies to offer further insights into how disabled women characters represent portrayals of resistance that go against normative culture to define their bodies on their own terms. I also employ rhetorical frames of the burlesque and grotesque as a methodology to uncover how these sketches portray disabled women characters as agents who reclaim and rework the cultural meanings of their bodies amidst ideological tropes of disability found throughout the dialogue of each scene.

Although the trope of otherness is employed in these sketches in ways that ridicule and shame the bodies of disabled women characters, I argue that to the contrary these characters' bodies provide a means by which they can transgress the normative ideals of the beauty myth in particular. My argument centers on how these characters challenge the normative definition of "physical disability as bodily inadequacy," as described by Garland-Thomson (1997a), through their corporeal deviance by utilizing the spectacle that is created by their disability(s) to subvert cultural standards of beauty and, at times, transform the shame that is placed upon their bodies (p.16). In doing so, these women characters enact agency by constructing their female disabled bodies as capable, desirable, and sexual.

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Chapter 1

Representations of Disabled Women in Popular Culture

Disability, like femaleness, is not a natural state of corporeal inferiority, inadequacy, excess, or a stroke of misfortune. Rather, disability is a culturally fabricated narrative of the body, similar to what we understand as the fictions of race and gender. The disability/ability system produces subjects of differentiating and marking bodies... Disability is a broad term within which cluster ideological categories as varied as sick, deformed, crazy, ugly, old, maimed, afflicted, mad, abnormal, or debilitated – all of which disadvantage people by devaluing bodies that do not conform to cultural standards. Thus, the disability system functions to preserve and validate such privileged designations as beautiful, healthy, normal, fit, competent, intelligent – all of which provide cultural capital to those who can claim such statuses, who can reside within these subject positions. (pp. 5-6)

- Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (2002)

(Disability is) the only ‘mark’ that could impinge upon each of the other categories (of identity). (p. x)

- Mitchell & Snyder (2000)

Writing extensively on feminist disability studies, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson explains that disability is a part of a cultural narrative of the body that variously marks disabled bodies as different and deviant because they do not conform to cultural standards. Likewise, Garland-Thomson (1997, 2002) contends that a woman is also often constructed through a cultural narrative that situates her body as devalued, incomplete, and defective, or in Aristotle’s words, “mutilated,” perceptually deemed a genetic disability. As a result of these perceived “defects” created and reinforced through cultural understandings of the woman’s body, these bodies are to uphold certain hegemonic ideals of femininity. These ideals are enforced through a woman’s behaviors regarding her appearance/beauty regimens and overall health and ability. As Russell (1995) argues, such ideals of femininity function to represent the woman’s body in delicate, vulnerable, and dependent ways.

As Garland-Thomson (2002) elaborates on, she finds despairing similarities between representations of both women and persons with disabilities; through popular culture, they are

“portrayed as helpless, dependent, weak, vulnerable, and incapable bodies” (p. 8; see also Ellis, 2015; Hall, 2011; Morris, 1992; Scott, 2015; Stone, 1995; Wendell, 1996, 2006). Furthermore, disabled women are often stereotyped as asexual, unfit to reproduce, and unattractive (Ellis, 2015; Garland-Thomson, 2002; Koppers, 2004; LeBesco, 2006; Quinlan & Bates, 2008; Scott, 2015). Thus, as previous scholars have demonstrated through analysis of both disabilities and women, the intersection of these two identity categories provides a fruitful research problem to examine the ways in which representations of disabled women figures stigmatize as well as incite critical politics pertaining to the body, ability, and gender.

Situated within a feminist disability studies framework, the purpose of this study is to examine representations of disabled women in popular culture.¹ There are many examples of depictions of disabled women in popular culture that can function as sites for cultural politics (Ellis, 2015). As a popular culture icon, *Saturday Night Live (SNL)* represents one such platform with a long history of portraying women with physical disabilities through ongoing narratives developed in sketch comedy formats.

Importantly, because narratives of disabled persons represent “a primary object of literary representation,” Mitchell (2002) argues that critics should focus on how representations of disability function as a narrative prosthesis (see also Mitchell & Snyder, 2000). According to Mitchell and Snyder (2000), a narrative prosthesis can function as “a character-making trope in the writer’s arsenal, as a social category of deviance, as a symbolic vehicle for meaning-making and cultural critique, and as an option in the narrative negotiation of disabled subjectivity” (p. 1). Because representations of disability on *SNL* work to position the disabled woman character as Other in each sketch for purposes of comic relief, these portrayals utilize a narrative prosthesis. It

¹ Throughout this study, I will use the term, disabled women, most often when referring to the analysis of women with disabilities. The term is often used by feminist disability scholars as a way to critically assess the intertwined connections between the identities of disability and women in society specifically.

is within this character-making trope of disabled women characters as Other that rhetorical work is being laid regarding the positioning of the body in both ideological and subversive ways. This rhetorical positioning functions to assign cultural meanings to disabled women's bodies in ways that most often support the dichotomous labeling of ability (as normative) vs. disability (as abnormal). Portrayals of disability often support this dichotomous interpretation of an ability/disability system that reinforces ideological understandings of the body and ability. But what happens to hegemonic cultural meanings when they are disrupted by a disabled woman character as she resists this ability/disability system? This is the unique question that this study seeks to answer.

Although the trope of otherness is employed in these sketches in ways that ridicule and shame the bodies of disabled women characters, I argue that to the contrary these characters' bodies provide a means by which they can transgress the normative ideals of the beauty myth in particular. For these women characters, their disabled bodies do not align with the intertwined cultural norms of ability and beauty. Through the trope of otherness, my analysis acknowledges how their disabled or deformed bodies are viewed by other characters as unfeminine, unattractive, and as representing a negative grotesqueness. My argument centers on how these characters challenge the normative definition of "physical disability as bodily inadequacy," as described by Garland-Thomson (1997a), through their corporeal deviance by utilizing the spectacle that is created by their disability(s) to subvert cultural standards of beauty and, at times, transform the shame that is placed upon their bodies (p.16). In doing so, these women characters enact agency by characterizing their female disabled bodies as capable, desirable, and sexual. As Lebesco (2006), Linton (1998), and Swan (2002) all contend, the concept of agency is of the utmost importance to understanding and uncovering the embodied perspective of disabled

persons. By highlighting their agency, I explore how these sketches present characters who act as subjects of cultural meanings by both challenging and revising the norms of the body. Overall, my study is situated within the field of critical disability studies to offer further insights into how disabled women characters represent portrayals of resistance that go against normative culture to define their bodies on their own terms.

To illustrate the complexities of the disabled women characters' otherness, I situate my analysis within a critical disability framework. Foremost, this perspective is used to highlight the cultural constructions of disabled women characters as exhibiting corporeal deviance. Specifically, employing feminist and critical disability theories will support my argument regarding how popular discourse continues to shape our cultural understandings of the body. Second, I utilize rhetorical frames of the burlesque and grotesque as a methodology to uncover how these sketches portray disabled women characters as agents who reclaim and rework the cultural meanings of their bodies amidst ideological tropes of disability found throughout the dialogue of each scene. In particular, as proposed by previous scholars, I apply the recommended stages or characteristics of these frames to reveal how each sketch rhetorically positions disabled women characters as Other through various interactions with other characters in this specific type of medium sub-genre.

In the following sections of this opening chapter, I will further contextualize my research problem by providing essential understandings of key notions concerning the study of disability and its representations in popular culture, ethical considerations of sketch comedy, and the popularity of *SNL* as a cultural artifact. The first section of this literature review will begin by defining disability.

Disability, Embodiment, and Culture

Defining Disability and the Disabled Body

In order to understand how disability is defined, we must backtrack to defining impairment, a related term that precedes the construction of disability. Berger (2013) defines impairment as “a biological or physiological condition that entails the loss of physical, sensory, or cognitive function” (p. 6). Citing Lennard Davis (1997), Donaldson (2011) explains how a biological impairment, regardless if it is mental or physical, becomes transformed into a cultural disability. Davis stated that “an impairment involves a loss...of sight, hearing, mobility, mental ability, and so on. But an impairment only becomes a disability when the ambient society creates environments with barriers – affective, sensory, cognitive, or architectural” (pp. 506-507, as cited in Donaldson, p. 104-105). Thus, through Davis’s explanation, we can understand how any biological impairment becomes culturally recognized as a disability.

As many scholars have previously discussed, disability specifically is defined through discourses for different purposes (Berger, 2013; Wendell, 1996). Like other identity categories, the concept of disability is also constructed through Western ideologies regarding the cultural, political, and medical aspects of the living body (Garland-Thomson, 2002; 1997). As Koppers (2004) summarizes, “what ‘everybody knows’ about disability is institutionalized, sedimented, and controlled by a powerful social discourse” (p. 50). Throughout each chapter of this study I will examine how popular discourse shapes our understandings of disability and how these understandings often come to be defined in limited and objectifying ways.

Prominent disability scholars, Mitchell and Snyder (1997) define disability as the “cognitive and physical conditions that deviate from normative ideas of mental ability and physiological function” (p. 2). While the above definition appears concrete, disability is

variously associated with different medical and social terms, as well as wide-ranging historical understandings of what constitutes a disability. For example, Mitchell and Synder (1997) find that an inclusive definition of disability must be comprised of all “social, historical, political, and mythological coordinates that define disabled people as excessive to traditional social circuits of interaction and as the *objects* of institutionalized discourses” (p. 2-3). According to Garland-Thomson (1997), the concept of disability is a representation which originates within the “cultural interpretation of physical transformation or configuration, and a comparison of bodies that structures social relations and institutions” (p. 6). Regarding physical disability in particular, contemporary scholarship pushes back against the idea that there is a universal inherent meaning (Dolmage, 2014; Newman, 2013). Rather, a given community defines what is considered normal for its members. Thus, in defining disability, such definitions are relative and bound by the different dominant groups who define cultural norms regarding the body and ability.

Garland-Thomson (1997a) observes that disability is culturally defined by people who assume the normate position. The normate is a constructed identity that regulates the rules and laws of the body. As a privileged subject position, the normate sets the cultural norms regarding what are considered normal and abled or abnormal and disabled bodies (Garland-Thomson, 1997a). Thus, a seemingly dichotomous system of ability/disability emerges through discourse to create cultural meaning regarding the body. As Dolmage (2014) describes, “Normalcy is used to control bodies primarily through (both) ableism ... (and) disablism” (p. 22). As he continues to explain, “Ableism renders disability as abject, invisible, disposable, less than human, while able-bodiedness is represented as at once ideal, normal, and the mean or default. Disablism constructs disability as negative quite directly and literally. Ableism constructs a mythical able-bodied norm, thus differentially constituting disability” (p. 22).

To situate this type of ideological thought, typically through dominant cultural meanings being formed in discourse non-disabled persons set the cultural standards from which society defines and views both abilities and disabilities.² Discourse works to mark out bodies that are different from the norm, as they are deemed to be lacking in ability. Furthermore, cultural standards inform how non-disabled people should interact with disabled persons. Paradoxically, the disabled body is defined by and through people who have yet to experience disabilities and do not often interact with disabled persons. Ironically, all individuals are only temporarily abled as disability and dilapidation are an inevitable condition of corporeality over time. In my analysis, it is evident that the other characters in these *SNL* sketches assign meanings to the disabled woman character and do so externally. As the rhetorical frame of the burlesque will highlight, non-disabled characters construct disability from a safe distance away from the actual lived experiences of disabled persons.

The normate position holds so much authority in perpetuating ableist thought through popular discourse that it is seen as fundamental, natural, and neutral to regard the body through ideals of normativity (Berger, 2013; Dolmage, 2014). Because of this perceived naturality, normate culture is reinforced as the norm that should not be transgressed (Stiker, 1999); rather, it demands conformity regarding normative thoughts and behaviors concerning the body and ability (Berger, 2013; Dolmage, 2014). Likewise, this conformity also pertains to gender and ability. As Hall (2011) emphasizes, “the normate’s gender and sex are not challenged, and the normate’s growth and development dictate how all should grow and develop” (p. 3).

It is important to note that there is no clear dichotomy of the normate and disabled people in culture (Garland-Thomson, 1997a). The normate position only emerges when we interrogate

² Although reinforced through the normate culture as dichotomous, scholars have observed that notions of ability and disability are actually constructed through a continuum that emphasizes the instability of these ideological systems of thought (Dolmage, 2014).

the social and discursive processes that constitute corporeal otherness. For example, Garland-Thomson (1997a) argues that disability “remains the mark of otherness” (p. 9; see also Berger, 2013; Mitchell & Snyder, 2000; Mogk, 2013; Siebers, 2008). Through such marginalization, the disabled body is stigmatized and primarily positioned as deviant. As she explains, this dominant trope of the disabled person as deviant presents a cultural visibility that both confuses and counteracts the “the normative figure that they legitimate” (p. 9). Thus, as Garland-Thomson asserts, it is imperative to examine “the processes and assumptions that produce both the normative and its discordant companion figure” (p. 9).

In society, certain bodies are valued and considered to be normative because of their abilities to perform in certain ways. For example, Garland-Thomson (1997a) notes how stairs create a disability for wheelchair users while ramps do not. Printed communication accommodates those with sight, while limiting the blind. Deafness is only considered disabling when a deaf person is not able to both sign and speak. Body strength is also bound by cultural expectations: we should be able to lift fifty pounds, but not an excessive amount like body builders do. Thus, Garland-Thomson views disability as an unstable identity category. Because cultural perceptions change over time, a person can become or unbecome disabled at any time.

In reality, because the status of being disabled is often unfixed and non-linear, it is something that can occur and variously change in ways that do not align with culture’s expectations regarding capacities and effective interventions. Unlike disease which has more determinate factors and timelines, disability is often unpredictable and varies more so by individual. Therefore, the, non-linear experience of being disabled is more unpredictable than having a disease or aging. For example, the ill and/or the aged partake in a natural cycle of biological processes and breakdowns and thus are associated with physical debilitating behaviors

and are often viewed as less productive members of society. However, as Mitchell and Snyder (1997) observe, “people with disabilities possess a biology that does not conform to even the most radical operations of normalization,” such as genetic conditions or birth defects (p. 4). Thus, disability resists normalization and a dichotomous system, often functioning in accordance with its own set of distinctive rules.

Additionally, in defining persons with a disability, there are many “intragroup variations.” Differing from many other identities, disabled persons have no unifying cultural heritage, traditional activities, or common physical experience (Garland-Thomson, 1997a). This non-unifying perspective is quite evident in the examples shared above regarding the different disabled categories and how each person’s experience varies. Garland-Thomson (1997a) argues that the only shared experience disabled persons have is stigmatization, which creates commonality.

Furthermore, as an identity, disability goes beyond just being categorized as physically or cognitively limited or different. According to Mitchell and Snyder (2000), “disability infuses every aspect of his or her social being,” including their physical and moral personhood (p. 3). As they further explain:

This equation of physical disability with social identity creates a tautological link between biology and self (imagined or real) that cannot be unmoored – the physical world provides the material evidence of an inner life (corrupt or virtuous) that is secured by the mark of visible difference. (p. 3)

Thus, in complex ways, the identity of disability emerges through interpretations of physicality and mentality that are both associated with and through the body and signals visual difference. Specifically as incorporated into my analysis, every disabled woman character’s identity is shaped by and through both physical and mental aspects that variously relate to her disability(s). For example, characters that have physical deformities or disabilities communicate through their

bodies and voices. Through their voices, they further communicate the differences of their bodies and at times also provide and describe more details about their disabilities or other ailments in grotesque ways. Sometimes, their voices also signal emotions, such as anger, sadness, or loneliness that also relate(s) to their disability(s) – either mental or physical. In other words, a physical disability is not cut off from mental aspects and vice versa.

Lastly, as it pertains to this study, it is important to situate the grotesque as it relates to understandings of normativity and the body. As Mogk (2013) summarizes, before the concepts of normal and abnormal emerged during the mid-19th century, bodies were categorized through the ideal and the grotesque. The ideal was the unattainable image of aesthetic beauty, often described and admired through images in art and sculptures of the human body. There was little pressure to exhibit this kind of ideal beauty, especially without the availability of technology to alter one's appearance. Conversely, before the mid-19th century the notion of the grotesque was ingrained throughout culture. Various, humans accepted and flaunted their grotesque bodies in ways that would be considered highly unattractive in contemporary society, such as showing excessive flesh or publically enacting excessive bodily functions and embodying structural flaws, for example bulging eyes or clawed feet, etc. (Mogk, 2013). After the mid-19th century, the norm became normative, replacing the cultural categories of the body as ideal or grotesque. From that point on, all people needed to adhere to the normative ways of exhibiting embodiment (See also Davis, 2005). Through this shift in categories of defining the human body, the notions of ability and disability fully emerged to become sedimented in culture and characterized disabled persons as deviant. In a sense, disabled persons became the updated version of embodiments of the grotesque. Hence, as my analysis will heavily reiterate, the grotesque is a fundamental construct

of disabled women characters in sketch comedy. Their bodies are characterized as grotesque based on their inability to conform to the norms regarding their disability(s) and their gender.

Overall, as Berger summarizes, disability studies aims to deconstruct and expose the “ideology of ability,” as famously coined by Tobin Siebers (2008). In doing so, Berger (2013) argues that it is important “to avoid the pejorative connotations of the term and reframe it as a matter of social difference” (p. 13). By framing disability as a complex cultural identity that implies social difference, I can further interrogate the diverse potential of representations beyond a dichotomous framework of ability/disability. For as Dolmage (2014) argues, “Disability should be understood as a form of diversity that can be appreciated as a different way of being embodied in the world” (p. 14). This study seeks to further uncover these diverse forms of embodiment by exploring how disabled women characters on *SNL* act as subjects to shape, alter, and revise the cultural meanings of their body.

Disability in Popular Culture

Seeing disability as a representational system engages several premises of current critical theory: that representation structures reality, that the margins constitute the center, that human identity is multiple and unstable, and that all analysis and evaluation has political implications.(p. 19)

- Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (1997b)

While disabled populations are firmly entrenched on the outer margins of social power and cultural value, the disabled body also serves as the raw material out of which other socially disempowered communities make themselves visible. (pp. 6-7)

- David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder (1997)

Representations of disability in popular culture most often rely on social stereotypes, depict characters’ limitations, and play a role in discrimination and thus structure reality (Garland-Thomson, 1997b; Shapiro, 1993). As Shapiro has argued, not only do representations

stigmatize, they also have become so ingrained in the minds of both disabled and non-disabled persons that ableist images of the body are internalized by all people, even people who have little existing knowledge of or no experience(s) with disability. Hence, no one escapes the power that ableism forms through discourse. In this section, I review how representations of disability continue to shape and/or reinforce the ableist position, but also at times simultaneously resist the normate system of thought. And like Garland-Thomson's summary above, I also highlight how representations of disability do not strictly stigmatize and deny subjectivity, but such portrayals also allow for the emergence of multiple and unstable identities concerning the body that can alter cultural politics on this topic.

To begin with, scholars have found representations to focus more on people's reactions to a disability – largely family and friends – rather than the disabled person's individual experiences (Ellis, 2007; Holton, 2013; Morris, 1991). Therefore, as Garland-Thomson (1997) observes, the disabled literary character is largely constructed based on cultural attitudes of a normate position rather “than by people's actual experience of disability” (p. 9). Through such cultural constructions, disabled characters are often represented in objectifying and stereotypical ways and denied opportunities for subjectivity or agency. Likewise, most often the audience members viewing such representations are predominately nondisabled persons who adhere to the normate position and have no experience(s) with disability.

However, Mogk (2013) argues that viewers do not really “see” representations of disability in a text and provides three reasons to support this claim. First, citing Longmore (1987), Mogk reiterates that as audience members we are trained to individualize disability and recognize it as an isolated condition that only pertains to a disabled individual. Second, representations of disability are left unnoticed because they are primarily used as a main

narrative device in, for example, a fictional film, television program, piece of literature, etc. Mogk emphasizes that as a narrative device, the trope of disability is utilized as “the most powerful vehicles of expression and narrative that we have” (available for use in popular culture) (p. 2). As previously discussed, Mitchell and Snyder (2000) refer to the use of this kind of device as a narrative prosthesis. Without realizing it, authors write and audience members observe cultural narratives of monsters and heroes alike that are indeed disabled, but the narrative trope functions to position depictions to center away from these fictional characters’ lived experiences with disability. Hence, the trope of disability likely remains undetected. Thirdly, according to Mogk, the strongest reason of why we do not “see” disability pertains to how culture defines bodily difference. Bodily difference is defined through language of the body through different social and political institutions and discourses. Anonymously, disability is the identity through which almost all other constructions of identity categories are shaped by variously defining persons as less capable. As Mitchell and Snyder (2000) have argued, through these cultural discourses, disability functions as the “master trope of human disqualification,” which functions to convey the overarching theme of corporeal otherness (p. 3).

Through this narrative trope of otherness, Quayson (2007) argues that representations of disability in literary texts signal what he refers to as “aesthetic nervousness.” He explains that this term is evident when “the dominant protocols of representation within the literary text are short-circuited in relation to disability” (p. 15). This term is largely, but not solely, evident at “the primary level...in the interaction between a disabled and nondisabled character, where a variety of tensions may be identified” (p. 15; see also Mogk, 2013). In a text, nervousness emerges through social attitudes that center disability around plots of non-contested prejudice and bias concerning the body, in other words the perspective of the normate. The nervousness

that is conveyed may be underlying through themes of anxiety, dissonance, and disorder that are created through tensions during the interactions between non-disabled and disabled characters in a scene. Following Garland-Thomson's (1997a) observation regarding the emergence of stigma in a text through the "first-time social encounters between the nondisabled and people with disabilities" in short-circuited ways, Quayson also argues that:

When one person has a visible disability...it almost always dominates and skews the normate's process of sorting our perceptions and forming a reaction. The interaction is usually strained because the nondisabled person may feel fear, pity, fascination, repulsion, or merely surprise, none of which is expressible according to social protocol...Perhaps most destructive to the potential for continuing relations is the normate's frequent assumption that a disability cancels out other qualities, reducing the complex person to a single attribute. (Garland-Thomson, 1997a, p. 12 as cited in Quayson, p. 16)

Instead of scripts constructing disabled characters through a variety of characteristics, they often omit and ultimately erase any complicating factors or traits; hence, scripts provide short-circuit versions of portrayals on disability that fail to relieve the tension posed by depictions of corporeal difference (Mitchell & Snyder, 2000).

Specifically as it relates to my study, to relieve tensions in *SNL* sketches non-disabled characters do readily react to the disabled woman character's corporeal differences. The non-disabled characters' reactions further reinforce the normate position, as they express repulsion for the ways in which those character's disabled bodies do not align with standards of beauty and femininity. In doing so, the scenes do not truly lighten or clear the tensions created by embodiments of corporeal difference or portray disabled characters through the diversity of individual characteristics or richness in their stories. Thus, as Garland-Thomson (1997a) argues, representations most often reinforce the disabled character being positioned "on the margins of fiction as uncomplicated figures or exotic aliens whose bodily configurations operate as spectacles, eliciting responses from other characters or producing rhetorical effects that depend

on disability's cultural resonance" (p. 9). As this analysis will also emphasize, themes of exoticism, including overt sexuality and grotesqueness, are part of a spectacle of disability in fictional narratives on *SNL*. Yet, although depictions of disabled women on *SNL* do largely reduce this character down to a single attribute of otherness through grotesqueness, this grotesqueness can be characterized in complex and subversive ways. These representations have the potential to signal further layers of cultural meanings that can work against the ideology of ability that is so often imposed in discourse.

As many scholars, including Garland-Thomson (1997a) further observe, in positioning the disabled person as other, disability representations are "grounded in the conventions of spectacle – (they) usually depend on the objectification of the spectacle that representation has created" (p. 12). Through these spectacles, disabled characters are rhetorically constructed through identifiably human traits, but ones that are purposely different (as will be further explained by the rhetorical frame of the burlesque in chapter two). As Garland-Thomson (1997a) notes, both the rhetorical positioning of the characters and the relations between disabled characters and normate readers would be ineffective if disabled characters tried to act as real disabled people often do and counter their stigmatic narrative.³ However, contrasting this research on the dominance of the normate position, disabled women characters on *SNL* do counter stigmatic narrative(s), but do not do so on normate terms to try to act more abled. Rather, their otherness is further emphasized by how they value and embody their disabilities and do not try to conceal them as the normate position would demand. As Mitchell and Snyder (2000) thoroughly explain:

³ These literary relations between disabled characters and normate readers counter the dynamism of real social relations between disabled and non-disabled persons (Garland-Thomson, 1997a). In real social relations disabled persons are likely to demonstrate complex characteristics that do not focus on highlighting their disability, which then potentially changes the interactions with non-disabled persons.

The power of transgression always originates at the moment when the derided object embraces its deviance as value. Perversely championing the terms of their own stigmatization, marginal peoples alarm the dominant culture with a canniness about their own subjugation. The embrace of denigrating terminology forces the dominant culture to face its own violence head-on because the authority of devaluation has been claimed openly and ironically. Thus, the minority culture deflects the stigmatizing definition back on to the offenders by openly advertising them in public discourse. The effect shames the dominant culture into a recognition of its own dehumanizing percepts. What was most devalued is now righted by a self-naming that detracts from the original power of the condescending terms. (pp. 35-36)

As Mitchell and Snyder observe, discourse provides an avenue for disabled characters to reclaim what normative culture has always withheld from them: defining their own bodies on their own terms. Through depictions of disabled women characters on *SNL*, their spectacle provides a means to transgress those ideologies that have so often spoken in place of their own voices/bodies.

Also, as is evident with the disabled women characters on *SNL*, their exaggerated body feature(s) represent visual difference(s) that signifies both their corporeal otherness and deviance through the construction of a freak. This single stigmatic stereotype of the disabled as freak thrives and becomes reinforced through tropes in popular culture, especially in the genre of horror and comedy. For example, beginning in the 1930s with Tod Browning's film, *Freaks*, the genre of horror initiated and perpetuated a long line of enduring stereotypes of physical disability. Berger (2013), Haller (2010), and Kennedy (2008) have noted how, historically, disability narratives have been a source of amusement and comedic relief for non-disabled people. Haller (2010) notes that "individuals with disabilities were used as court jesters, exhibits of curiosity in 'freak shows,' or as cartoon characters with comical speech and sight problems" (p. 155).

According to Garland-Thomson (1997a, 1996) – who wrote extensively about the cultural constructions between disability and freaks – during the freak show eras, people with congenital

physical and/or mental disabilities and other persons whose bodies visually signified “absolute alienness” were owned and/or profited by Western men, who defined them to mass audiences as “eroticized” freaks and the antithesis of the white, Western abled man (1997a, p. 17). The freak’s spectacle stood in complete opposition to the bodies of the onlookers who united as mass audiences to confer their normality. As Garland-Thomson (1997a) further explains, the construction of freaks provides “ordinary” persons the “opportunity to formulate the self in terms of what it is not” (p. 59). Furthermore, the freak also shares similar characteristics of representations of women in popular culture. In her comparison Garland-Thomson (1997a) observes, “Both are owned, managed, silenced, and mediated by men; both are socially defined as deviations from the ideal masculine body; both are marginalized in the realm of economic productions; both are appropriated for display as spectacles; both are seen as subjugated by the body” (pp. 70-71). As I will discuss throughout my analysis, these disabled women characters’ otherness represents freaks whose identities are defined and managed largely by featured men characters.

Beyond the freak stereotype, scholars have noted other prominent media stereotypes of disability that highlight corporeal otherness and/or deviance: 1) Disabled person as victim, who may or may not take advantage of the “sick” role, which through the burlesque/negative grotesque framing is a theme found in SNL’s depictions of disabled women (Quinlan & Bates, 2008); 2) A supercrip: a person with a disability who triumphs against all odds over his or her infirmity; 3) Disabled person who is viewed as a burden on friends, family, or society because of physical limitations or psychological problems he or she faces, which through the burlesque/negative grotesque framing is another theme found in SNL’s depictions of disabled women; 4) The idea that bad parents, mothers in particular, are punished for their wayward

actions by the birth of a disabled child; and 5) The wise simpleton: a character who is seen as innocent and saintly, but also sage-like, such as the character, Forrest, in *Forrest Gump* (Berger, 2013; Kennedy, 2008; Riley, 2005). Although Garland-Thomson (1997a) observes that such representations of disability seem to position it “as a multivalent trope,” these narratives of disability foremost remain “the mark of otherness” and fail to depict disabled persons as ordinary people with ordinary lives (p. 9; see also Ellis, 2015; Hoffner & Cohen, 2012; Oliver, 1996). As Joy Donaldson (1981) adds, in fiction the disabled person experiences othering by “some sort of stress, trauma, overcompensation, character flaw or bizarre behavioral tendencies’ (p. 415). For example, primarily as a form of denigration and also for purposes of comic relief, a disabled character can also be stereotyped as a comic misadventurer by getting into trouble due to their impairment (Berger, 2013). In particular, this stereotype is reinforced with one disabled women character on *SNL* – Dooneese – who is always blamed for ruining the television broadcast segment that her sisters and she appear on.

Beyond these specific cultural stereotypes and as directly related to my study, Hall (2011) observes evidence of a double bind in representing the sexuality of disabled characters (see also Quinlan and Bates, 2008). First, Hall notes the assumption that “disabled people cannot be sexual beings” (p. 4). In regards to disabled women, Garland-Thomson (1997a) defines this assumption as “asexual objectification,” in which a disabled female body is viewed as asexual and unfeminine (p. 25). Through these two characterizations, the term rolelessness emerges; in response, disabled women, who because of cultural norms feel socially invisible and unappealing, work to resituate this oppression by reclaiming their own female/disabled identities as they see fit. According to Hall, the second part of the double bind states that while physically disabled persons are often constructed asexually, “cognitively disabled people are

(simultaneously) often stereotyped as hypersexual” (p. 4). At times, both assumptions justify the treatment and representations of and interactions with disabled persons, especially disabled women characters as we will see through depictions on *SNL*. Ironically, as disabled women characters who are constructed through the grotesque their overt sexuality is connected to the ways in which their bodies do not align with the beauty myth.

Regarding representations of disability in comedy, Quayson (2007) writes that they “are not merely reflecting disability; they are refractions of that reality, with varying emphases of both an aesthetic and ethical kind” (p. 36). It is the ethical considerations of representations of disability that critics are most often concerned with, and for sketch comedy, portrayals of disabled women characters are used unethically or ethically to incite laughter. Berger (2013) argues that representations of disability in comedy require a critical eye to assess the complex use of humor for purposes of denigration and/or enlightenment. Specifically, Berger (2013) and Haller (2010) both discuss two types of humor in representations of disability. Considered to be unethical, disabling humor involves the normative position of representations of disability in comedy, and thus a sketch, for example, positions disabled character’s differences to be *laughed at*. Conversely and ethically, disability humor implies a comic framework of *laughing with* the disabled character who acts as the comic fool to be funny without being inept and not to be ridiculed for their disability(s) to achieve comic relief. Regarding portrayals of disabled women characters on *SNL*, they fit under the category of unethical, disabling humor through which mainstream, non-disabled audience members are encouraged to *laugh at* these characters for privileged pleasure (Haller, 2010).

More specifically, Haller (2010) summarizes four phases of disability comedy in the 20th and 21st century. Categorized as disabling humor, phase 1 included freak shows and portraying

mentally disabled people as fools. Also considered to be disabling humor, phase 2 was characterized by sick and quadriplegic jokes, and Helen Keller type jokes, “which made fun of people with disabilities and emphasized their ‘limitations’” (Haller, p. 170). All of phase two jokes were both created and used for humor about disability by non-disabled people.

Contrastingly, in phase 3, disabled people create disability humor and take control of the message. As Haller summarizes, “These disabled humorists poke fun at society’s barriers and their own place in a world that has pitying or negative attitudes toward them... (it) doesn’t just go for the laugh; it allows non-disabled people to see issues related to disability in a different light” (p. 170). Haller argues that such humor revolutionizes the genre of disability humor. When humor is constructed by disabled people for all audiences, Haller believes that it can challenge stereotypes and further understanding (See also Berger, 2013). Lastly, in the new fourth phase, characters and jokes are a part of a kind of post-disability construction that takes an integrated approach rather than a disability-focused approach. Finding this phase empowering, Haller writes that disabled characters are simply

Another character in the humor landscape. The humor does not focus upon the person with a disability and much of the humor has no disability theme at all. This is the true innovation of these shows – disability is just part of the diverse humor panorama, not the reason for the comedy. (p. 170)

Haller notes that the potent potential of the third and fourth phases lies in the non-disabled audiences’ knowledge of the text’s author being disabled. Haller believes that if the author is not disabled or the audience fails to learn or recognize the author’s identity, then the humor can be interpreted as discriminatory and unfunny. Overall, Haller notes how Baum finds constructive, positive humor to create “positive environments where people support each other, promote self-esteem and create mutually beneficial connections. Destructive humor does the opposite” (Baum p. 4, as cited in Haller, p. 156). Haller furthers that destructive humor places “disabled people

apart by poking fun at what are seen as their inadequacies.” (p. 156). Representations of disability in comedy do not seem to fit into the third and fourth phase of disability-based humor. As will be further discussed, representations of disability on *SNL* do not appear to be written by disabled persons. In many known cases, the disabled women characters are ones created, at least, in part by the actress playing her. Thus, representations of disability on *SNL* seem to follow an extension of the second phase of disabling humor by ridiculing disabilities for purposes of laughter and engaging non-disabled audiences.

Overall, this section has reviewed pertinent findings regarding disability in popular culture. While research suggests that popular culture largely represents disability in stereotypical and negative ways, there have been and continue to be positive and subversive representations of disability, especially that of the disabled woman. In chapter two, I will discuss the cultural model and the rhetorical frameworks that will further explain how a critic can go about analyzing representations of disability, including representations that are positive, negative, and also transgressive. In chapter three, I will also further highlight popular culture’s role in providing representations of the beauty myth, as they pertain to disabled woman characters specifically. Next, I will discuss the ethics of sketch comedy formats and then conclude this chapter by explaining why Saturday Night Live is an influential piece of popular culture, worthy of critical analysis.

Sketch Comedy Formats and the Popularity of *SNL*

Ethics of Sketch Comedy Formats

Sketch comedy is a prevalent sub-genre of comedy that pervades American television. The most popular American TV sketch comedies in the late 20th and early 21st century have included more recent Comedy Central programs, including *Inside Amy Schumer* (2013-present),

Key and Peele (2012-present) and *Kroll Show* (2013-2015), *Dave Chappelle show* (2003-2006), Fox's *Mad TV* (1995-2009), *In Living Color* (1990-1994), and the enduring legendary *Saturday Night Live (SNL)* (1975-present). At times, even Comedy Central's Satire News programs – the *Daily Show* (1996-present), *Nightly Show* (2015-present), and the *Colbert Report* (2005-2014), and network late night talk shows, such as NBC's *The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon* (2014-present) and *Late Night with Seth Meyers* (2014-present), CBS's *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* and *The Late Late Show with James Gordon*, and ABC's *Jimmy Kimmel Live* (2003-present) – have all utilized the sketch comedy format throughout episodes.

Regarding its representations, many sketch comedy programs have adhered to hegemonic norms concerning how women are to provide humor or are even allowed to perform in comedies at all. For example, Bore (2010), Kotthoff (2006), and Mellencamp (2003) discuss that cultural norms deem it largely inappropriate for women to have a presence in public displays of comedy and to act clownish or foolish. In regards to comedy mediums, television has been largely dominated by male actors/comedians and masculine ideals of comedy (Bore, 2010). Aligning with a burlesque rhetorical frame, Marc (1989) argues that on television comedic relief is achieved by narratives encouraging audiences to laugh *at* the woman character's flaws/incompetence and not *with* her as she displays inept characteristics.

As previously discussed, from a disabling humor perspective a sketch's comic relief is unethically centered on the "flawed" characteristics of a disabled person. In these scenarios, the author(s) of the text is not a disabled person. Because *SNL*'s writing staff is highly composed of current or former featured actors/actresses on the show, it is highly unlikely that the writers are disabled. Haller claims that it is largely unethical for a non-disabled person to write a script that centers on the "flaws" of the disabled character for comedic relief. If the author is not disabled or

if this identity is unknown, Haller argues that the humor is then otherwise cruel and not funny because the non-disabled person is writing this humor from an external distance, unaware of real people's experiences with disability.

Conversely, supporting a comic framework, both Mellencamp (1986) and Rabinovitz (1991) argue that women performers can act as the comic fool to resist the constraints of hegemonic comedy. Rabinovitz argues that these characters can be potentially "funny without being incompetent" and have significance by displaying "female comic disruptiveness" (p. 364). Both Mellencamp and Rabinovitz argue that comedy can work strategically to position female characters as possessing qualities that the audience can laugh *with* the character's "flawed" behaviors and not *at* them. Thus, as Mellencamp reiterates, female characters would not exhibit anger when their incompetent positions and characteristics are highlighted, and the audience, especially female viewers, could replace possible feelings of associated anger with a sense of pleasure as they view female characters' "flawed" behaviors in this hegemonic space.

As chapter 2 will further discuss, although my study does not find evidence of a comic framework in depictions of disabled women on *SNL*, through the burlesque and positive grotesque frameworks women characters do have the potential to subvert hegemonic ideals. While transgression is possible, it is done through the burlesque framework that positions the disabled woman character as different and marginalized. In particular, these SNL sketches do not encourage identification with the disabled woman character; however, through highlighting her otherness – her perceived "flaws" and "deficiencies," the sketches also provide a counter-narrative in which we can understand how the disabled woman character subverts cultural norms regarding her perceived differences. Specifically, the genre of sketch comedy allows for multiple

analytical interpretations, and several rhetorical frames will be used to fully uncover these layers of analysis.

Prevalence of SNL as Mainstream Culture

As the most famous sketch comedy in the U.S., *SNL* provides a very fruitful medium to explore topics of marginalization. As a series, *SNL* has obtained widespread popularity and sustained longevity; it has aired for more than 40 consecutive years, now broadcasts internationally, and also lives on in syndication and internet clips. Because of its popularity and longevity, *SNL* is a staple of mainstream television sketch comedy.

Although research has found that *SNL* began with the intention of sending alternative/subversive messages through comedy (Marx, Sienkiewicz, & Becker, 2013), the show is most definitely a part of mainstream popular culture. Therefore, while the show takes risk and a main goal is subversion, it sends messages through the mainstream and not alternative avenues. When the show debuted in October 1975, its structural approach, with a live show, guest host, monologue, sketches, and musical acts, provided an alternative to what was considered mainstream comedy at the time. Through these platforms, *SNL* became a popular commentary on contemporary events (Marx et al., 2013).

According to Marx et al. (2013), while *SNL* is known for a tradition of certain formats/formalities and genre aesthetics, over the decades, producers/writers had to reinvent the show within the frameworks of tradition. Such reinvention was especially evident following what many television critics called “the loss of irony” after the events of September 11, 2001 (Spigel, 2004). Thus, Marx et al. (2013) summarize that *SNL* does what it has always done best: “it changed by staying the same” (p. 2). The show uses the same formats/formalities to introduce new actors and actresses, recurring scenes/characters, and new catchphrases and jargon.

According to Marx et al. (2013), as a media institution, *SNL* is the closest to embodying “every element of the cultural, technological, political, and aesthetic evolutions embedded in the history of television” (p. 2).

In comparison with other sketch comedies, *SNL* more readily contains representations of disabled characters, including women. Largely, other sketch comedies either lack scripts that focus on disability or it is portrayed through male characters. Thus, *SNL* provides a fruitful artifact to critique on the topic of disabled women in sketch comedy. As will be described below, this study begins to fill a gap in research on *SNL* will also be eased on the topic of disability and women specifically.

Previous Scholarship on Saturday Night Live

A plethora of scholarship on the topic of *Saturday Night Live* has placed primary attention on political parodies and the weekly news sketch, weekend update. (Abel & Barthel, 2013; Battistella, 2006; Baumgartner & Morris, 2008; Baumgartner, Morris, & Walth, 2012; Becker, 2012; Cao, 2011; Day & Thompson, 2012; Esralew & Young, 2012; Flowers & Young, 2010; Holbert & Geidner, 2009; Jones, 2009; Michaud Wild, 2015; Niven, Lichter, & Amundson, 2003; Peifer, 2013; Reinheld, 2006; Young, 2011; Young & Tisinger, 2006). This scholarship has variously focused on how the show’s political parodies and satirical news segments have rhetorically positioned politicians and political ideas in a favorable or unfavorable light. Such studies have demonstrated the rhetorical impact *SNL* has had on real-life discussions about these political topics. Some scholarship has also summarized the history of the series and a few former *SNL* actors/actresses have written memoirs (Cader, 1994; Davis, 2009; Fey, 2011; Hill & Weingrad, 1986; Shales & Miller, 2002; Whalley, 2010). Few scholars have focused on social identity issues on the series, including the topics of race, gender, and the body (Bush,

Bush, & Boller, 1994; Haggins, 2007; Lacroix, 2011; Miller, 2000; Olbrys, 2006). In particular, two studies have centered on the controversial depiction of David Patterson, a partially blind former governor of New York. These studies were conducted through audience analysis, with concerns placed on the impact of humor on political perceptions more so than disability (Becker, & Haller, 2014; Peifer, 2016).

More specifically, *Saturday Night Live & American TV* (Marx et al., 2013) is the only edited book collection that examines *SNL* through different cultural, industrial, and social aspects and influences of the series. The book collection pays direct attention to the following themes: as a trend setting production, growth as an entertainment empire, social politics and comedic representation, and expansion/popularity of the show in other mediums beyond television. The book chapter sections relating to social politics and comedic representations and popularity of *SNL* beyond television are of particular interest to this study.

Marx et al. (2013) summarize that *SNL* continuously faces the challenge “to push boundaries enough to garner laughs and reinforce its countercultural reputation while nonetheless remaining within the realm of what is acceptable for network broadcast” (p. 14). Because of the constraints of commercial broadcasting and its own workplace ideologies, Marx et al. (2013) observe that *SNL* faces particular limitations in presenting radical portrayals relating to identity.

Yet, while Marx et al. (2013) do note that the show’s scripts stay within the realm of social norms, *SNL* as a leader of television comedy has brought some identity issues to the forefront. More radically, *SNL* introduced Jewish-centric comedy when most networks were afraid to use such humor. The tokening of many of Eddie Murphy’s characters during his long tenure also led the way for future black comedy shows, such as *In Living Color* (1990-1994),

Martin (1992-1997), and *Living Single* (1993-1998). Likewise, Marx et al. mention that gay and androgynous recurring characters, such as the androgynous character, Pat, and the closeted character, Stuart Smalley, helped pave the way for other LGBT characters found on shows beginning with *Will & Grace* (1998-2006). Differing from the extreme depictions of sexist behavior towards women characters in previous decades, television critics have argued that the 21st century “Tina Fey” era brought about significant changes, many opportunities, and gender equity for women writers/actresses.

However, when it comes to representing identities, critics have found that discrimination still permeates many of *SNL*'s scenes. The book chapter by Murphy (2013) reiterates that through a male-dominated bias, sexism still exists in depictions featuring women. This bias has even played a role regarding the hiring of plus-size women or disciplining the bodies of existing women cast members who are told they must lose weight, including Tina Fey (Witchel, 2001) and Casey Wilson – who was reportedly fired in part for not losing 30 pounds (Casablanca & Bain, 2009). This standard contradicts with the popularity of tokened plus-size men actors, such as Chris Farley and most recently Keenan Thompson, whose characters so notably lead with their overweight physiques for comedic relief throughout the series.

Because of workplace culture, Marx et al. (2013) observes how some identities are largely absent or negatively stereotyped on the show. For example, there is an enduring absence of gay, lesbian, non-white, and I would even add, overweight women actresses/actors on the show. While there are some tokened actors/actresses of racial diversity, mainly men, and the hiring of Aidy Bryant, a plus-size woman actress in the 2012-2013 season, when it comes to recruiting diverse talent, *SNL* still remains within the ideological holds of a heteronormative Hollywood ideal (Wallace, 2012). More recently, the racial controversy reemerged as many

television critics shamed the show for hiring six new cast members – five white males and one white female during the 2013-2014 season. Many critics asked why the series has rarely embraced the presence of black actresses on the show, both as cast members and as hosts (Couch, 2013; Luippold, 2013). In response to this media criticism, in January 2014 the series added a black actress to the cast, along with two black female writers (Collman, 2014). These changes demonstrate how the producers can listen and respond to public criticism concerning the equality of identity groups on the series.

Pertaining to disability specifically, *SNL* has also more recently endured criticism of their portrayal of former Governor David Paterson of New York, a partially blind man, who appeared on a segment of weekend update in 2008. Both media commentators and David Paterson himself found the portrayal to be offensive. In response, David Paterson appeared on weekend update in 2010 with Fred Armisen, who played another parody of him. During the sketch, the real Paterson criticized the show for highlighting his disability and portraying him as a confused and disoriented politician. In both this sketch and in previous statements since *SNL*'s first depiction of him in 2008, Paterson noted how he found the portrayals to be offensive to people with disabilities. He stated that “the idea of a person rolling around the stage in a chair, being disoriented, can't find anything, bumbling, in a sense looking like a clown is a way disabled people are portrayed all the time...The perception that disability equals (the) inability to be responsible is totally wrong” (Mooney, 2008, para. 5, 6). Although Governor Paterson reasoned that he personally engages in self-deprecating humor and can handle the derogatory stereotype, he is more concerned with how disabled persons may negatively interpret such representations. Beyond Paterson's response, the blindness community raised significant concerns that these types of continuing derogatory media narratives devalue and stereotype them (Haller & Becker,

2014; see also Becker & Haller, 2014). Although people at large interpreted the initial sketch to be derogatory, *SNL* did eventually respond with allowing the actual David Paterson to refute the stereotypes of blindness. Like *SNL*'s response to diversify casting following the media commentary regarding the lack of ethnic diversity among cast members, the series also eventually listened to media backlash and gave Paterson the platform to counter the stereotypical parody.

Overall, *SNL* provides a rich popular culture artifact that represents identity issues, including disability. However, other than the depictions of Governor Paterson, scholars have not readily focused on examining disability on the series, and more specifically, how the identities of gender and disability intertwine in depictions. Like the chapters on social issues and representations in Marx et al. (2013), this study also considers disability regarding “how intermittently progressive approaches to ... gender, and sexuality have coexisted alongside Eurocentric, heterosexist, and patriarchal norms, and... how *SNL* has both challenged and reinforced dominant cultural discourses” (p. 15).

Why *SNL* Specifically?

In giving an overview of this research problem, I have addressed why the subject of disabled women in popular culture is an important topic to explore. As it relates to the following study, *SNL* provides a platform for representations of disabled persons that depicts both ideological and subversive portrayals. As reviewed above, there are many different types of platforms through which disabled women, in particular, are represented on *SNL*. In comparison to weekend update segments or digital short films, there is more character development and interactions with other characters in actual sketches on *SNL*. Because of its longevity, the sketch

comedy format provides the most dynamic representations of disability and allows for the most fruitful analysis of disabled women characters in particular.

Regarding the selection of disabled women characters for this analysis, I chose characters that have developed backstories. These backstories include extended details about their personal/professional lives, families, and/or hobbies. The majority of the characters I chose are also recurring on the series, thus providing more of a developed backstory over time. More so, each of their developed backstories help further their construction(s) of disability and gender, and for a critic, more development aids in deciphering the type(s) of disability(s) that each character exhibits. Furthermore, the majority of these selected characters have become very popular both as series' featured characters and also in the realm of popular culture, with fans even emulating some of these characters through pastiche, such as on Halloween, mock sketches on YouTube, and memes on social networks. Thus, these characters' backstories create both intrigue and controversy that is ripe for analysis regarding disabled women.

Overview of Chapters

In closing, this chapter has addressed the research problem of disabled women in popular culture. In doing so, I have discussed definitions of disability and the disabled body specifically. Through these definitions, the research problem is established regarding how the normate defines ability and disability and how the disabled body becomes marked as Other. The review of literature on disability in popular culture further reinforced the otherness of the disabled figure in media representations, while also revealing representations that counter stereotypes through subversion. Likewise, a review of the ethics of sketch comedy and specifically as related to research on *SNL* reveals that sketch comedy formats are likely to position both women and disabled persons as Other. While most scholarship on *SNL* has focused on other political and

social identity issues, this study looks to further focus on the depictions of disabled women and how they are Othered and/or transgress cultural norms regarding their bodies, ability(s), and gender.

In the next chapter, a detailed review of related rhetorical frames and critical/cultural theories of the body – mainly stemming from feminist and disability studies – will be explained. Through this chapter, I will highlight theoretical frameworks and methodologies that will provide a basis for understanding representations of disabled women in both hegemonic and subversive ways. Then in what follows, chapters three will provide my analysis of disabled women characters on *SNL*. By applying the theoretical frameworks, chapter 3 will argue that, although seemingly ideological, the disabled women’s physical body provides ways in which disabled women characters can transgress the normative ideals of the beauty myth. In this chapter, I first discuss the ideologies of ableism evident in the sketches, and then I highlight how disabled women characters utilize the spectacle of their corporeal otherness to define their bodies on their own terms. In chapter 4, I summarize my findings regarding disabled women characters on *SNL* and offer broader insights regarding representations of disabled women specifically in popular culture.

Chapter 2

Disabled Women as Other in Society

The notion of a (disabled) subject of discourse can have two contradictory meanings. It is either one who is *subject to* the hegemony of a cultural ideology that is internalized and therefore inaccessible and nonnegotiable; or it is one who acts as agent and *subject of* cultural meanings that are understood to be contingent, negotiable, and revisable. (p. 285)
- Jim Swan (2002)

As discussed in chapter 1, through discourse we come to understand how the ability/disability system is contrived. As Swan reiterates above, discourse provides two contradictory meanings of a disabled subject in popular culture. Through representation, scholars have found disability to be depicted in ways that reinforce ideologies of the body and ability and also in ways wherein fictional disabled subjects enact agency in defining and characterizing their disabilities.

In order to understand the ways in which a disabled subject acts as an agent by altering and revising the meanings of their disability(s), we must first understand how they are defined ideologically as the Other. As previously discussed, scholars have found the normate position to emerge through an interrogation of the disabled subject in discourse. Through discourse, a dichotomous ability/disability system is enforced via the ideological constructions of disabled bodies as abnormal and thus as representing the Other. However, through the othering of disabled characters, we find texts rich in complex representations of disability that perpetuate ideologies of the body and ability and may also subvert associated cultural norms.

As mentioned in chapter 1, to understand the complexities of representations of disabled women characters as Other, I employ a critical disability perspective and use rhetorical frames as a basis for methodology. As will be further elaborated on, a critic's merging of disability studies with rhetoric can form what Dolmage (2014) refers to as "a critical alliance" in efforts to "pay close attention to embodied difference" (p. 3). He argues that by "situating disability as uniquely

rhetorical,” critics can “challenge cultural meanings that surround disability” and reveal ways in which representations on this subject are positive, meaningful, and create alternatives to the normative understanding of the body (p. 4). Like Dolmage, in merging these disability and rhetorical perspectives, I account for the ways in which representations of disabled women characters on *SNL* rhetorically situate the female disabled body as Other to challenge and redefine the meanings assigned to their bodies. To begin situating a critical disability perspective, I will first discuss the three main models for conceptualizing the constructions of disability in society. These models not only help critics to shape their understandings of disability but also can be utilized as a means to approaching an analysis of representations of disability.

Models of Disability: Medical, Social and Cultural

The foundation for defining and understanding disability originates from the medical model of disability. While this model provided the initial perspective on disability, medicalization has endured much criticism. Overall, the medical model relies upon medicine as an authority figure to define the body and ability specifically. While it is important to understand the biological origins of a person’s disability and is obviously essential to the well-being of the individual and to the field of medicine itself, there are serious drawbacks to letting this approach solely lead one’s perspective on disability. Specifically, Goodley (2014) observes that understanding disability through medical knowledge encourages it “to be read solely through biological, genetic, hormonal, neurological and physiological language” (p. 4). The focus on individualism – a person’s physical, sensory, or cognitive impairments – is a limited approach to understanding the full picture of disability. According to Ellis (2015), this medical perspective narrowly centers on the approach of disability “as a personal problem to overcome” (p. 2).

According to Williams (2001), the medical model paved the way for real persons with disabilities to receive better attention regarding medical diagnosis and treatment, and they were viewed more benevolently. However, medicine has always largely been an institution ingrained in patriarchal norms, specifically in its medical knowledge and practices (Chesler, 1979; Hurt, 2007; Russell, 1995). These patriarchal norms are imbedded in how medicine has historically defined the woman's body, who defines the anatomy of the female body, how she receives a diagnosis, and how she physically and mentally handles an illness. These patriarchal norms are especially evident in medical discourse surrounding the diagnosis and treatment of women with disabilities.

In response to the one-dimensional, institutionalized medical model, critical disability theorists developed the social and cultural models of disability. According to Quayson (2007), by the 1980s a shift emerged regarding the understanding of disability outside of medical discourse and focused on it "as primarily the product of social circumstances," such as the architectural environment, public-transport systems, and normative attitudes about disability (p. 2). This social model stresses a focus on how these different environmental and social circumstances create potential barriers and difficulties for disabled persons in everyday life. Ellis (2015) summarizes that the social model understands disability "as the restriction of social activity imposed on top of people that have impairments and is very much concerned with access to the workforce" (p. 2). For example, Goodley (2014) explains that "the problematic lives of intellectual disabilities were not caused by intellectual disability: many problems of access, support, community participation, and acceptance were problems of a disabling society that threatened the very existence of people who were cognitively *different* to the mainstream (my emphasis)" (p. 7). Regarding the social elements of support, community, and acceptance, representations of

disabled women characters on *SNL* fit right into this model. Society works to define these characters and their disabilities in ways that cast a light of negativity on their differences and shun them from community life and support. Overall, Goodley (2014) summarizes that the social model of disability focuses on real conditions of disablism, which are material and can be potentially fatal. Yet, critical theorists have found limitations with the social model approach.

Beginning with Mitchell and Snyder (2000, 2006), critical theorists in the 21st century have argued that the social model neglects to incorporate understandings of cultural representations and stereotypes of disability that also shapes its definitions. These theorists argue that the need for these cultural understandings is evident due to the emerging and shifting representations of disability in popular culture over the last twenty-five years. In trying to understand cultural representations of disability, Mitchell and Snyder (2000) suggest the application of four different categories for analysis: 1) Negative imagery, in which a critic exposes stereotypes; 2) Social realism, in which a critic highlights realistic aspects of portrayals of disability; 3) New historicism, which considers representations based on the historical contexts and culture(s) of that time period; 4) Biographical criticism, when critics locate and analyze the works of disabled authors; and 5) The most essential part of analysis is to analyze counter-hegemonic representations of disability, what Mitchell and Snyder identify as transgressive reappropriation. Here, Mitchell and Snyder encourage critics to look at deeper layers of the narrative to find empowering and subversive depictions within stereotypical portrayals of disability. Mitchell and Snyder's recommendations reiterate what a number of scholars have also called for regarding the need for critics to further uncover the alternatives to cultural norms that can be articulated through representations of disabled bodies (Dolmage, 2014; Garland-Thomson, 1997a; Lebesco, 2006; Swan, 2002).

Specifically, the social and cultural models pertain to my analysis of physically disabled women characters on *SNL*. Regarding the social model, we will find evidence of the disabled women enduring a lack of community and acceptance. Regarding the cultural model, these representations portray negative stereotypes of disabled women characters and also offer counter-hegemonic depictions by transgressing cultural norms regarding the disabled women's body and mind. The rhetorical frames of the negative burlesque/grotesque and positive grotesque will further enhance the analysis of the social and cultural constructions of disability.

Critical Disability Studies

In order to thoroughly examine disability from a humanities perspective, Mitchell and Synder recommend considering its social, artistic, and political functions. A humanities perspective situates the study of disability by simultaneously defining it as uniquely subjective while identifying the social phantasms that have been historically projected upon the disabled figure. In doing so, critical disability studies not only considers disability for critique; rather, it also contemplates the intersectional complexities of politics, ontology, and theory (Goodley, 2011).

As previously discussed in chapter one, when critiquing disability there are two conceptual areas rich for theory building and analysis: ideologies and subversions pertaining to the body's ability. Scholars should explore a range of complexities in representations of disabled persons for the ways in which bodies are hegemonically objectified and/or are empowering through acts of transgression (Dolmage, 2014; Garland-Thomson, 1997a; Goodley, 2011, 2014; Hall, 2011; Lebesco, 2006; Mitchell & Snyder, 2000; Swan, 2002). To do this, Goodley (2011) first emphasizes that critiques of disability must be mindful of the "complementary hegemony of ablistm" – the normate (p. 157). By studying ableist mainstream culture, critical disability studies

scholars must first aim to deconstruct the hegemonic subject via the able individual, foundational discourses, and political and cultural orders.

Second, while the study of disabled persons highlights the processes through which mental and physical features are dichotomously marked as normal or abnormal, such an analysis can also illuminate potentially positive and empowering outcomes from such labeling. According to Garland-Thomson (1997a), the complexities of disability representations need to be examined in ways that go beyond the analysis of the “monologic interpretation of corporeal difference as deviance” (p. 9). To do so, Goodley (2011) poses the following questions for consideration: How do societal practices uphold the precarious higher status of non-disabled people through the abjection (rejection) of disabled people?; In what ways do disabled bodies rearticulate what qualifies as a body that matters?” (p. 159). Employing a feminist disability approach, along with rhetorical frames, will help to answer these important questions listed both above and below as it pertains to representations of disabled women.

In studying the abjection and rearticulation of disabled persons, scholars can readily examine how the disabled body that demonstrates counter-hegemonic acts of transgression can potentially provide empowerment. Specifically, Goodley (2011) encourages critics to rethink self and other through the study of acts of transgression. Goodley advocates for how critics can study transgressive acts that describe identities which “shift norms, straddle standards and shake up the dis/ability distinction” (p. 160). For example, Goodley suggests that critics study performativity for an exploration of how disciplined bodies may offer symbolic alternatives. Second, Goodley discusses the term affirmation in relation to reshaping disability as a positive identity and notes the potential subversion of disability stereotypes. Goodley specifically asks, “To what extent do non-normative people subvert full, rigid and unwelcoming heteronormative social settings?” (p.

161). As will further be discussed, this study finds positive potential in the transgressive behaviors enacted by physically disabled women characters who resist the beauty myth by defining their bodies on their own non-normative terms.

In examining the hegemonic and counter-hegemonic acts of the disabled body, Western connections of disability with gender provide a starting point for exploring the relationship between social identity and the body. Bordo (1993a, 1993b) argues that there is a mind/body duality regarding gender roles and associations. Associated with the mind, the male is identified as active and intellectual, while the female is associated with the body as being passive and primitive. Bordo (1993b) explains that women are variously associated as the body in negative ways, including as a “distraction from knowledge, seduction away from God, capitulation to sexual desire, violence or aggression, failure of will, even death” (p. 5). Bordo (1993b) asserts that a woman’s life becomes “centered *on* the body”, including both “the beautification of one’s own body and the reproduction, care, and maintenance of the bodies of others” (p. 17). Thus, as she affirms, “culture’s grip on the body is a constant, intimate fact of everyday life” (p. 17). Bordo (1993b) observes this grip to include the centering of the woman as body through “femininity as delicacy and domesticity” (p. 18). In referencing Foucault (1979), Bordo (1993b) also observes the ways in which a woman’s body is disciplined – as a “socially trained, ‘docile body’” (p. 18). A woman’s body is trained and disciplined to align with standards of beauty, femininity, and heterosexuality.

More specifically, Garland-Thomson (2002) makes parallels to show how both a woman’s and disabled person’s body are disciplined through the interrelated cultural discourses of medicine and appearance – what is referred to by Naomi Wolf (1991) as the beauty myth, a term that I will return to explain in depth in chapter three (p. 10; see also Bartky, 1990; Hall,

2011). For example, when juxtaposed next to male bodies, the female body is defined and/or depicted as mutilated, deviant, and potentially monstrous (Garland-Thomson, 1997; Hall, 2011; Kromm, 1994). These gender/disability associations create a dichotomy of the male representing a more complete body and the female as the more deficient body. As my analysis in chapter three will demonstrate, representations of the disabled women on *SNL* reinforce this dichotomy by positioning her body as deviant, but also deficient.

In addition, as Garland-Thomson (2002) highlights, like disability, gender is also highly pervasive in culture, and as an identity category, it is shaped and shifts via institutions, identities, practices, politics, “historical communities, and the shared human experience of embodiment” (p. 4). Wilson and Lewiecki-Wilson (2001) argue that “because the disabled have always been defined as deviant bodies, ‘corporeal’ feminism,’ which rethinks the body as a ‘site of the mutually constitutive interaction’ between discourses and materiality (Balsamo 163), also has much to offer a disability studies analysis” (p. 3). Similarly, as Hall (2011) recommends, to study the female disabled body specifically scholars need to provide insights regarding the relationship between gender, disability, and experience while simultaneously addressing the body’s materiality. Thus, feminist disability studies scholars seek to theorize and analyze the body, bodily variety, and normalization as it relates to oppressive forces in culture.

A main objective of this study is to examine constructions of the disabled woman’s embodiment – how her body is displayed and performs. Because scholars want to distance themselves from the biomedical model’s understanding of the disabled body as an object that can be rehabilitated or cured, both Quinlan and Bates (2008) and Mitchell and Snyder (2001) observe that critics have moved away from examining the embodiments of disabled persons in popular culture. As Quinlan and Bates explain, disability scholars “have often ignored the corporeal

experience of the disabled body and have also moved us away from the material, somatic body” (p. 66; see also Harter & Kirby, 2004; Japp & Japp, 2005; Mitchell & Snyder, 2001; Wilson & Lewiecki -Wilson, 2001). By neglecting the construction of embodiment, Mitchell and Snyder (1998) specifically assert that scholars are ignoring the fact that “all bodies are deficient in that materiality proves variable, vulnerable, and inscribable” (p. 7). If critics ignore disabled embodiment, then they have ignored the multiplicity of bodily forms and therefore limited their ability to reveal the alternative understandings of the body (Kuppers, 2004; Quinlan & Bates, 2008).

Lastly, Garland-Thomson (2002) argues that feminist disability theory finds the body to be disabled once it becomes incongruent in its physical and attitudinal environments. In other words, when the body manifests into something out of sync with its environment – the culture/norms – then the body has become defined as disabled. This incongruity is central to how the disabled women characters on *SNL* are ridiculed for their mental and physical differences. Likewise, this incongruity will be further supported through the rhetorical frames that highlight the disabled characters’ differences amidst other characters who demonstrate culturally normative behaviors.

In this section, I have reviewed critical and feminist disability scholarship on the body, disability, and gender. This research has rather conclusively revealed the ways in which hegemonic power structures have shaped our understandings of disabled women. It has also revealed strategies for resisting the patriarchal definitions of women and disability. As feminist scholars have advocated for, in my analysis I will also strive to highlight disabled women/bodies that are largely invisible or threatened with annihilation and discover strategies of rethinking and reimagining the body. To do this, I will need to analyze the cultural contexts of these

representations (Garland-Thomson, 1995). The rhetorical frameworks will further help me to situate my analysis and understanding of these power structures and cultural contexts. I will now explain how certain rhetorical frames can be applied to depictions of disabled women on *SNL*.

Rhetorical Tools for Analysis

Disability Studies and Rhetoric

Disability is often used rhetorically as a flexible form of stigma to be freely applied to any unknown, threatening, or devalued group. In these ways, the ‘abnormal’ or extraordinary body is highly rhetorical. So we need to look for it actively and engage the rhetorical body... (to) reclaim stories from the margins. (p. 4)

- Jay Dolmage (2014)

As disability studies became a prominent discipline largely taking shape during the 1990s, by the 21st century rhetorical scholars also began to more readily interrogate constructions of disability from a rhetorical perspective (Brueggemann, 1999; Dolmage, 2014; Dolmage & Lewiecki-Wilson, 2010; Duffy, & Yergeau, 2011; Houck & Kiewe, 2003; Lewiecki-Wilson, 2003; Lewiecki-Wilson & Brueggemann, 2008; Moe, 2012; Schell, & Rawson, 2010; Wilson & Lewiecki-Wilson, 2001). Specifically, Dolmage (2014) argues that “rhetoric has ignored the body... and this ignorance is reinforced by a fear of imperfection, a fear of the strange bodies of Others” (p. 5). To expose these fears of “imperfect” and strange bodies, we need to study the rhetorics of the disabled body. As it pertains to my analysis, by studying the rhetorical positionings of disabled women characters in sketches allows me to uncover the constructions of “imperfect” bodies based on both their ability and gender.

Specifically, a methodological tool that has yet to be utilized by scholars studying disability is rhetorical frames. As will be further explained, rhetorical frames provide lenses to understand constructions of a character’s difference(s) in a text. Previous scholars have utilized rhetorical frames to study the speech, the body and transgressions of persons in narratives

through many platforms, mediums, and genres, including the genre of comedy (Appel, 1996, 1997, 2003; Carlson, 1986, 1988; Desilet & Appel, 2011; Gring-Pemble & Watson, 2003; Kline, 2010). However, narratives of disability in sketch comedy have not yet been studied through the application of rhetorical frames. As a methodology, rhetorical frames can highlight the complex meanings of these sketches (Brummett, 2014). Below, I will discuss how these frames are especially applicable to understanding the rhetorical positioning of disabled women characters as other in sketch comedy.

Rhetorical Frames in Popular Culture

Just as critical theorists have found, rhetorical theorists, such as Brummett (1991) and Hart and Daughton (2005), also argue that because artifacts can be good or bad, complex, and/or ambivalent, such objects' meanings are never objective, static, or definably fixed. Thus, for Brummett (1991), situating the rhetoric of popular culture is two-fold: one must consider how artifacts are influential and shape our identities, and "how cultures symbolically nurture and engender their members" (p. xxi). Similar to critical theorists, Brummett also views culture as the site of struggle on its own – "things (experiences) are what we make them because we manipulate strategies of understanding and meaning...we (symbolize) act rhetorically" (xvii). As rhetorical critics, we can study how rhetorical frames work to position meaning, in this case specifically regarding sketch comedy.

In summarizing Burke's (1969) explanation of difference in culture, Brummett (1991) observes that:

People are threatened by differences. We do not like to think that others are strange and alien, and when we perceive differences between ourselves and others, we work to overcome them. The condition of being different and estranged from others is referred to as *mystery*, and Burke argues that we try to overcome mystery. Differences are overcome by entering into relationships that are organized around certain rules and principles; these relationships are called *hierarchies*. By 'playing by the rules' of the hierarchy, we find

common ground between ourselves and others, and we are able to keep mystery at bay. The common ground that is established in hierarchies is a way to achieve *identification* with others, which is something people generally want. (p. 190)

From Burke's perspective, because humans are symbol-using animals, we use "equipment for living" to symbolize experience. "Equipment for living" includes the use of hierarchy to frame social order, including social change. Burke (1959, 1966) categorizes these hierarchal frames as either ones of acceptance or rejection and emphasizes that they represent the negotiation of social conflict (See also Kline, 2010). Burke (1959) explains that these general framing options evolve from the problem of evil:

In the face of anguish, injustice, disease, and death one adopts policies. One constructs his notion of the universe or history, and shapes attitudes in keeping. Be the poet or scientist, one defines the 'human situation' as amply as his imagination permits; then, with this ample definition in mind, he singles out certain functions or relationships as either friendly or unfriendly. If they are deemed friendly, he prepares himself to welcome them; if they are deemed unfriendly, he weighs objective resistances against his own resources, to decide how far he can effectively go in combating them. (pp. 3-4)

Further, Burke (1959) discusses how these general frames both work actively to "prepare us *for* some functions and *against* others, *for* or *against* the persons representing these functions...they suggest *how* you shall be for or against," in this case how those deemed non-disabled people welcome or shun a disabled person (p. 4). Burke argues that frames of rejection are by-products of acceptance. As Burke (1959) reasons, frames of rejection emphasize a "*shift in the allegiance* to symbols of authority" (p. 21). Thus, rejection frames have much in common with what it rejects – acceptance. As Kline (2010) explains, it is useful to theorize acceptance and rejection "in terms of the relationships that constitute a social order; the question is whether there is an attitude of renegotiating the terms of the relationship or a complete rejection of any possibility of a relationship" (p. 58). Kline summarizes that through a rhetor's framing choice(s)

of an issue, rhetorical critics can analyze how a threat – in this case the body of a disabled women character – is dealt with in the desired social order of each sketch in particular.

Specifically, Burke categorizes acceptance (positive) frames as including literary/poetic forms of the epic, tragedy, comedy, and rejection (negative) options of the elegy, satire, burlesque, and grotesque. Previous studies have used Burke’s rhetorical frames to examine how hierarchies of meaning are arranged in public discourse (Appel, 1996, 1997, 2003; Carlson, 1986, 1988; Desilet & Appel, 2011) and popular culture texts (Gring-Pemble & Watson, 2003; Kline, 2010). Specifically, Burke’s theoretical frames can aid critics in understanding the potential complexities of a given comedic text on the topic of marginalization, such as *SNL*. Gring-Pemble and Watson (2003) challenge critical rhetoricians “to recognize humor as a powerful rhetorical strategy, to identify its various forms and uses, and to highlight the challenge it can pose to open debate of controversial issues” (p. 151). In response to this challenge, I find two of Burke’s methodological frames to be extremely applicable to the positioning of the disabled women in sketch comedy: the burlesque and the grotesque. Below, I will explain the connected frames of the negative burlesque and grotesque, and then I will discuss Bakhtin’s theoretical framework of the positive grotesque, which has also been furthered by feminist scholars.

Burlesque/Grotesque Frames

A burlesque frame is built around the notion that there is no room for negotiating meanings of the social order, in this case meaning that disability can only be represented in fixed, one-dimensional ways that oppresses a disabled character for their perceived differences. In this framing, the transgressor’s actions – the disabled women’s behaviors and body – are so appalling that they provide the impetus for ridicule and laughter. Here, Burke (1959) notes that the rhetors

– the *SNL* writers – “might very well protect himself by not imagining them (the disabled characters) with too great intimacy. For to picture them intimately, he must be one with them” (p. 53). In other words, the rhetor does not treat the transgressor character as equally constructed or one that the audience can identify with. Thus, by taking a “safe” external approach, the rhetor can merely and “superficially” describe a transgressor’s behaviors without fully embracing and understanding the other’s perceived difference(s). As Burke (1959) explains, the rhetor is able to externally construct the victim – the disabled character – by making “logical conclusions” that reduces the transgressor to only reflect characteristics of absurdity (p. 54). As it relates to these *SNL* portrayals and as mentioned in chapter one, the rhetors – the writers of the sketches – are known not to be or are likely not persons with disability. Thus, they are likely ignorant to the actual lived experiences of the disabled women characters. By using burlesque framing to construct the transgressor/victim through an incomplete, partisan process, the rhetor purposely defines the disabled character as unequal to other characters. In doing so, Burke observes that from a safe distance the rhetor is able to “discount” the transgressor/victim.

Burke (1959) notes that because of the rhetor’s external construction, burlesque frames are usually only used occasionally. This is often the case in *SNL*’s portrayals as depictions of extreme difference are usually only portrayed in no more than a few sketches per episode. The rest of each episode largely consists of other comic, satirical, and parodied depictions. Interestingly, Kline (2010) notes that the average viewer will not make the distinction between the burlesque frame of rejection and the comic frame of acceptance, in which the transgressor’s actions are acknowledged for comic relief, but then by the end of the sketch the character is accepted by others. This comic frame is not evident in any of the sketches being analyzed of disabled women, as none of them are accepted by the other normative characters at the end of the

scene. Only in two sketches are two of the analyzed disabled women characters excepted by another character, who is considered non-normative and potentially disabled, as well.

To help guide my analysis of the disciplined body, I will use Appel's (1996) generic features of the burlesque that stem from Burke's framing theories. In a given burlesque sketch, the opening begins with a "black and white disorder" in which the transgressor/antagonist (also known as the disease (Burke, 1959)) violates the rules of the existing social order. Here, Kline notes that through the transgressor's behavior a dichotomy is established of "right" (normative characters) and "wrong" (transgressor(s) – disabled character). Here, the antagonist provides alternatives to resolving conflict between the supposed right and wrong. In explaining the mediation of the burlesque, Appel observes that the transgressor's violations "are not the mistakes or defects of comedy, nor are they quite the crimes and evils of tragedy. They *are* gross transgressions that call for a forceful, biting response" (p. 272). Second, another main character – usually the lead male character(s) of the sketch – who is considered to be the pompous, all-knowing hero, or as both Appel and Kline describe as the "guilt-mongering logician" or the "good guy," becomes spotlighted to emphasize and place blame on the transgressor's absurd and "distorted clownish," in this case grotesque, behaviors. Here, as is similar in the grotesque frame, the burlesque also uses incongruity to juxtapose the transgressor – the disabled woman – against the "good guy," often a male lead character.

As previously discussed, in this stage, the usually male hero – the burlesquer – stigmatizes the transgressor by focusing only on external characteristics of their behaviors and draws them to a general logical conclusion that emphasizes and targets their absurdities (in this case regarding their disabilities and related behaviors). Kline (2010) notes that by the "good guy" placing attention on the transgressor, the victim receives their moment in the spotlight. However,

as defined in the next phase, the transgressor experiences limited scapegoating. Thus, through limited exclusion, the transgressor experiences a moment of emphasis but is not situated among the righteous (Appel, 1996). Here, Kline (2010) notes that “the opponents are only hailed into being in order to scapegoat them, or point out their flaws” (p. 59). Unlike comedy which slaps the wrists of the transgressor only to embrace them or unlike tragedy which “kills” their enemies dead, the burlesque outcasts the victim to rid them of the featured scene of activity. Appel (1996) notes that through becoming the outcast, a burlesque frame works to rid the transgressor from the forefront of the story but it is done so within *seemingly* ethical boundaries of human sympathy. Lastly, the redemptive stage positions the moral welfare of mainstream viewpoints through the burlesquers’ position – the “good guys.” As Burke (1984) summarizes, in this conclusion a burlesquer’s “cynical self-interest” prevails as “the most logical of policies” which reflects a more perfect, improved, or less chaotic condition than the one demonstrated by the disabled women (p. 93).

In regards to representations of disability, Mitchell and Snyder (2001) find disability to be viewed ‘as a restrictive pattern of characterization that usually sacrifice(s) the humanity of the protagonist and villains alike’ (p. 196). Regarding representations of disability on *SNL*, evidence supports this observation regarding the role of the protagonist (but not for the villains, as there are rarely ever representations of this type of character in sketch comedy). These representations follow a burlesque framework as the disabled character’s humanity is usually sacrificed for the purposes of comic relief. In sacrificing the disabled character’s humanity, the normate is reinforced through the dominant positioning of the non-disabled characters.

Bordo’s (1993a, 1993b) observations on the hegemonic aspects of representations on difference, especially that of the body, further supports the understanding of the burlesque

framework. First, as it relates to the rhetorical power structures of the normate position in a sketch and the protagonist's loss of humanity, Bordo (1993b) argues that "representations *homogenize*. "They smooth out all racial, ethnic, and sexual (and, I would add disability and gender) 'differences' that disturb Anglo-Saxon, heterosexual expectations and identifications" (p. 24- 25). While Bordo (1993b) explains that there are images/representations in consumer capitalism that go against this dominant hegemonic grain, "a definite (albeit not always fixed or determinate) system of boundaries sets limits on the validation of 'difference'" (p. 25). Second, Bordo observes that "homogenized images *normalize* – that is, they function as models against which the self continually measures, judges, 'disciplines,' and 'corrects' itself" (p. 25). Here, in particular, we can see how the concept of the normate is at work in the homogenization of depictions of disability and how the burlesque framework further highlights such representations. Specifically, the burlesque framework highlights how disabled bodies are constructed, judged, and should be disciplined.

In particular, Olbrys's (2006) study is especially useful in understanding the functions of the disciplined body on *SNL* through a burlesque/grotesque frame. Olbrys analyzed the disciplining of the body of Chris Farley's character, Barney, in the infamous 1990 Chippendale dancer sketch with Patrick Swayze's character, Adrian. Here, Farley's character represents the carnivalesque – the excessive, fleshy, hyperbolic – body. Farley's flabby body and uncontrolled, awkward dance movements were juxtaposed next to the mainstream, chiseled, controlled dance movements of Patrick Swayze's character. Olbrys finds that these depictions promote pleasure at the expense of the carnivalesque body. Overall, Olbrys (2006) argues that more studies need to take issue with "how mainstream discourse productions such as *SNL* might utilize this imagery in service of the status quo" (p. 241). For depictions of disabled women characters, the status quo is

the normative understanding of disability that is imposed in these sketches, which further reiterates the ability/disability system.

In order to understand the grotesque and its potential dual role with the negative burlesque and also the positive grotesque frame, the notion of the classic body must first be defined. Originating from Bakhtin (1968), he defines the classic body as an artificial construction of the body that denies human nature itself. As Russo (1995) describes it, the classic body is “closed, static, self-contained, symmetrical, and sleek,” viewed as exceptional, monumental, rational, and as integrated into high or official culture (p. 8). In regards to disability, the classic body resembles the normative; it defines that which is to be considered proper for the body and how it should be displayed, and in turn it also then defines the disabled and/or the grotesque body – that which is not the fixed, self-contained body.

However, as Bakhtin (1968) observes, the notion of the material body is contained through the people, “a people who are continually growing and renewed” (p. 19). Therefore, because people experience, grow, and alter or change over time, the notion of the classic body is an illusion due to the falsehood of its notion as a fixed, self-contained body. What people really embody, but work to hide and reject, is a grotesque body. Stallybrass and White (1996) summarize that “the grotesque body is emphasized as a mobile, split, multiple self, a subject of pleasure in processes of exchange; and it is never closed off from either its social or ecosystemic context” (p. 22). In various ways, the disabled body represents a body in motion that may be split (as we see with disabled women characters on *SNL* who have physical deformities), or has a multiple self that exhibits pleasure, often sexual, in things that are considered non-normative and abject, and that understands its social positioning as a disabled body (which is also evident in most of the narratives of analyzed characters).

Specifically, Olbrys (2006) explains two distinct types of the grotesque body: the negative and the positive. First, Burke (1959) theorizes the negative grotesque through a frame of rejection, often as unintentional burlesque. Burke observes that the grotesque is noted when texts place “more prominence to the subjective elements of imagery (psychological grotesque notions/images) than to the objective, or public, elements” (p. 60). In summarizing Bakhtin (1968), Rowe (1995) emphasizes that “the grotesque exaggerates incompleteness, process, and change, maintaining a kind of moral neutrality or ambivalence toward time and death” (p. 32). Negatively, the grotesque aligns with the burlesque to portray the disabled woman character as exemplifying non-normative characteristics that go against the norms of a female body and exaggerates its incompleteness and changes – specifically through her ability, gender, and also often sexuality. By bringing the negative grotesque into focus with the burlesque, a critic not only pinpoints how a sketch sets up the disabled women character to be ridiculed and ostracized, but also how this task is accomplished by highlighting her non-normative characteristics – in this case, her unfeminine mannerisms and lacking in ability.

The ambivalence of the grotesque is also further exemplified in the positive grotesque, which is not theorized by Burke, but has been conceptualized by Bakhtin and feminist scholars. Even though the positive grotesque represents subversion, it is important to note that it stems from a burlesque framework through which the transgressor is initially ridiculed. More specifically, Bakhtin (1968) explains how the positive grotesque is constructed through the carnivalesque as the “ever unfinished, ever creating body” that “exceeds its own limits” and implies transgression (p. 26). Thus, even though the transgressor is first burlesqued, the positive grotesque still functions to disrupt and counter the notion of the classic body. The positive grotesque framework provides a potent way of understanding the disabled women/her body as

defying the confines and standards of her (pre)scribed submissive, feminine role and the limitations of an ableist frame of beauty.

In furthering the notion of the positive grotesque, scholars from many disciplines that study the body/femininity/disability have noted that images of the grotesque also pose ambivalence that can be potentially subversive (Bakhtin, 1968; Bordo, 1993a, 1993b; Bouson, 2009; Garland-Thomson, 1997a; Goodley, 2011, 2014; Hall, 2011; Kristeva, 1982; Owen, Stein, & Vande Berg, 2007; Pelle, 2010; Rowe, 1995; Russo, 1986,1995; Stallybrass & White; 1996). Rowe examined how portrayals of the grotesque – “the figure of the unruly woman” who is “too fat, too funny, too noisy, too old, too rebellious – unsettles social hierarchies” (p. 19). Rowe defines this unsettling of the social order as female transgression. Similarly, Pelle (2010) found Margaret Cho, a stand-up woman performer, to embrace her “grotesque” characteristics – linked to her gender, sexuality, and ethnicity (and I would add disability) – in order to alleviate feelings of public shame for not being “normative.” Pelle defines this embracing of the grotesque as transformative shame. Likewise, as is central to the following analysis, the “shameful” grotesque features of disabled women’s bodies can be transformed into a positive embracement by such characters. Here, disabled women characters work to usually purposely exhibit grotesque elements of their disabled bodies to create a spectacle, which, in turn, offends others. In doing so, these disabled women characters claim subjectivity of their bodies and desires (Rowe, 1995).

Conclusion

As my study will now elaborate, my analysis of physically disabled women characters will highlight the ways through which their bodies and minds work together to form their perceived grotesqueness. Specifically, I find textual evidence of the transformative aspects of the physically disabled women characters as they subvert the beauty myth. Prior to highlighting

the transformative aspects of their subversions, my analysis of the characters begins by defining the negative burlesque/grotesque structures of relevant sketches and then transitions to a discussion of the positive grotesque elements. It is within the positive grotesque analysis that I uncover and weigh the potential subversion of the disabled women characters from a feminist disability perspective. I will now transition to chapter 3 and my analysis of physically disabled women characters and their transgressions of the beauty myth.

Chapter 3

I'm rocking one leg! Jealous?!': Cultural Norms and Resistance in Portrayals of Disabled Women Characters on *SNL*

To embrace the supposedly flawed body of disability is to critique the normalizing phallic fantasies of wholeness, unity, coherence, and completeness. The disabled body is contradiction, ambiguity, and partiality incarnate. (p. 28)

-Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (2002a)

We're stormy, and that which is ours breaks loose from us without our fearing any debilitation. Our glances, our smiles, are spent; laughs exude from all our mouths; our blood flows and we extend ourselves without ever reaching an end; we never hold back our thoughts, our signs, our writing; and we're not afraid of lacking. (p. 878)

-Hélène Cixous, *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1976)

Rael (Cloner; Interviewee): Ladies and gentlemen, the world's first cloned human: Baby Eve! [Baby Eve steps forward]

Brigitte Boisselier (Cloner; Interviewee): Oh, there we go!

Rael: We are still working on a few of the kinks! Say hi! Say hi to America, honey!

Baby Eve: [makes gurgling noise]

Brigitte Boisselier: Isn't she adorable?

Tina Fey (Interviewer): Are you *sure* this was successful?

Rael: Uh, well.. we're on TV, aren't we, Tina!

Tina Fey: Point taken. The crazy clone people, everybody and their messed up baby Eve. (S.28, E. 9)

In the previous chapters, I highlighted scholarship that has theorized and examined the many parallels evident between the social meanings assigned to both female and disabled bodies. To reemphasize, as Garland-Thomson (1997a) explains:

Both the female and the disabled body are cast as deviant and inferior; both are excluded from full participation in public as well as economic life; both are defined in opposition to a norm that is assumed to possess natural physical superiority. *Indeed, the discursive equation of femaleness with disability is common, sometimes to denigrate women and sometimes to defend them.* (my emphasis) (p. 19)

In the above sketch on a brief segment of *SNL*'s "Weekend Update," the disabled female, "Baby Eve" (played by Rachel Dratch), is positioned to be denigrated by the general public for her deformed, cloned body; whereas, her cloners, Rael and Brigitte Boisselier, understand that she

is not considered to have a classic/abled body (yet), but appreciate and defend her abilities nonetheless. This sketch represents contradictory depictions of the female disabled body: considered to be a freak, this character is largely characterized through the normate and is seen as weak, incoherent, unintelligent, and unattractive. However, Baby Eve also represents an extraordinary body that is positioned outside of the dichotomous constructions of an ableist/disabled culture. Her corporeal deviance – her weaknesses, differences, and grotesque features – holds the potential to subvert these negatively associated attributes that characterize Baby Eve as a physically disabled female. Thus, as we begin to understand the themes that characterize Baby Eve, along with other physically disabled women characters on *SNL*, multiple meanings emerge.

In the following analysis, I argue that these depictions on *SNL* represent physically disabled women as Other through two significant cultural meanings: the denigration of the disabled woman by other characters while simultaneously the disabled woman subverts her perceived corporeal difference(s). In doing so, these physically disabled women transgress the beauty myth by proudly displaying grotesque spectacles through their bodies and also often their voices. By challenging the normate definition of “physical disability as bodily inadequacy,” as Garland-Thomson (1997a) describes it, these disabled women characters articulate alternatives to ableist thought and also gender norms regarding the female body (p. 16). In order to fully highlight the duality of the representations, I will first apply the burlesque/negative grotesque framing to explain the ways in which other characters demean each physically disabled woman’s body; second, through the positive grotesque, I will explore how these disabled women characters resist cultural norms of the body. To help support this complex analysis of physically disabled women/their bodies, I will now first explain cultural norms of beauty and femininity.

Disabled Women, Beauty, and Femininity

Disabilities, in contrast, are imagined to be random transformations that move the body away from ideal forms. In a society in which appearance is the primary index of value for women, beautification practices normalize the female body and disabilities abnormalize it. (p. 28)

-Rosemarie Garland Thomson (1997a)

The twin ideologies of normalcy and beauty posit female and disabled bodies, particularly, as not only spectacles to be looked at, but as pliable bodies to be shaped infinitely so as to conform to a set of standards called *normal* and *beautiful*. (p. 11)

-Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (2002)

As previously discussed in chapters 1 and 2, the cultural context defines the body and creates normative thought. Discourse that defines normative thought also often centers on defining gender norms as it relates to the body and ability. Recalling Bordo (1993b), she explains that women, in particular, are “associated with the body and largely confined to a life centered *on* the body” (p. 17).

In culture, one of the most constant productions and maintenances of the woman’s body is beautification. In preserving personal beauty, Bordo (1993b) accounts for the ways in which women’s bodies are disciplined and contained to a strict regimented life – a “socially trained, ‘docile body’” that portrays femininity “as delicacy and domesticity” (p. 18). Bordo emphasizes that the most trivial aspects of a woman’s bodily existence in everyday life greatly contribute to the social constructions of femininity as an oppressive norm. Specifically, a woman’s physical appearance largely defines how she is valued in society. For example, attractiveness or unattractiveness more predominately characterizes a woman’s value in culture more so than men. This attribute or the lack thereof is largely formed through the intertwined areas of associated gender norms of femininity and beauty, health regiments, and media representations.

Specifically, media representations often play an integral role in reinforcing the normative beauty of a woman. This ideal physicality of a woman often includes her being defined as white, slender, symmetrical facial proportions, flawless and youthful looking skin, and not exhibiting any physical disabilities or deformities (Kilbourne, 1994; Nemeth, 2000; Wolf, 1991). These representations of women's embodied beauty communicated across media impact cultural perceptions regarding notions of the body and also how women interpret, value, and identify with their own bodies.

As a component of embodied beauty, scholars have observed dichotomous thinking regarding the sexuality of disabled women; most often, they are either depicted and/or viewed by the public as asexual (Nemeth, 2000; Quinlan & Bates, 2008; White, Rintala, Hart, & Fuhrer, 1993) or unable to perform fully sexually, or, on the other hand, sexually promiscuous and deviant (Lebesco, 2006; Longmore, 1987). Because disabled women are often excluded from portrayals of romantic relationships and sex, viewers' expectations are violated when women with disabilities are sexualized in the media.

Furthermore, as Ellis (2015) summarizes, Naomi Wolf's (1991) concept of the 'beauty myth' can aid in further situating the ways in which all female bodies – both disabled and non-disabled – are “marginalized according to seemingly arbitrary cultural values” (p.54). This marginalization occurs through the reinforcement of seemingly trivial yet in actuality “unobtainable and rigid standards of beauty” (Ellis, p. 39). In particular, Ellis observes how in popular culture “the beauty myth has intensified and the ideal (body) is becoming increasingly conflated with the norm (body)” (p. 55). Thus, women, in particular, may learn from the media that their bodies are inadequate if they do not fit within the rigid, normative standard of embodied beauty – a body that has been modified, especially surgically (See also Garland-

Thomson, 2011). In contemporary society, the beauty myth is evident when the surgically altered body is interpreted as the normative and 'natural' ideal body. As Garland-Thomson (2011) describes, "The beautiful woman of the twenty-first century is sculpted surgically from top to bottom, generically neutral, all irregularities regularized, all particularities expunged. She is thus nondisabled, deracialized and de-ethnicized" (p. 24).

While the beauty myth perpetuates an ideal, surgically altered, abled white female body, Ellis (2015) points out that the "tyranny of the beauty myth" impacts "different people in different ways, thus providing an opportunity to consider the cultural construction of disability" (p. 40). Hence, the cultural category of disability describes many bodies that do not meet these rigid standards of beauty and do not pass as normative. These disabled bodies may include but are not limited to impairment, illness, injury, weight, age, deformity, and scars (Ellis, 2015; Garland-Thomson, 1997a). For disabled women specifically, their appearances are more harshly and negatively assessed in culture, often resulting in being defined outside of the norms of traditional beauty and femininity and excluded from discourses of beauty and sexuality. Because there are such seldom portrayals of disabled women as ascribing to traditional beauty, these women are not often constrained to the expectations of the beautification of the female body (Fine & Asch, 2009). However, by disabled women being excluded from these ideological holdings of beauty, Ellis observes that "this exclusion may serve as another site of cultural disablement" (p. 55).

A prominent example of a disabled woman resisting this exclusion from traditional beauty is Ellen Stohl. As the first disabled woman to pose nude in *Playboy* in the 1980s, Stohl argued that her young adult life post-paralysis left her feeling like an asexual child. Stohl stated that she approached *Playboy* to be in the magazine because she wanted to reclaim her sexuality

and not to please men or others, but to regain her confidence as a woman who could still fit into traditional ideals of beauty and sexuality. In other words, Stohl was not content with her post-paralysis body and wanted to portray to others that disabled women can be sexually desirable as acting in alignment with traditional standards of femininity (Ellis, 2015; Garland-Thomson, 2002). Unlike the disabled women characters on *SNL*, Stohl does not yearn to explore her beauty outside of traditional cultural norms. Regarding her body, she wants to feel desired in the same way she felt pre-paralysis. As Quinlan and Bates (2008) caution, sexualized images of disabled women such as Stohl's "may create a new beauty myth to which individuals with disability must aspire" (p. 75). Limited portrayals of disabled women conforming to traditional beauty standards and regiments provide examples of how these women can also assimilate into the beauty myth.

While disabled women may assimilate into the beauty myth, Garland-Thomson (2002a) and Ellis (2015) both emphasize the potential for disabled images to disrupt conventional understandings of beauty. As discussed in chapter 2, through the positive grotesque, disabled women characters have the potential to subvert cultural norms regarding the beauty myth and the disabled body and furthermore transform those norms into an embodiment that is both positive and empowering. In doing so, these characters transform female body shame. These characters do not feel shame for their corporeal differences, instead they transform this deviance into an embodiment through their own agency. In this process, Pelle (2010) summarizes that these characters might take their shaming and internalize it and then throw it "back upon the perpetrator, and/or radically twists their meanings" (p. 23). Through these transformative acts, these women characters claim subjectivity of their bodies and desires.

Lastly, in his book on disability rhetoric, Dolmage (2014) argues that stereotypical representations and tropes of disability generally imply mythology because in Barthe's (1972)

words, “meanings are attached to these images, and they become routinized and easily consumed” (p. 92). He argues for an “investigation of disability myths” as “an extension of...(his) interrogation of the logics of normativity” (p. 31). Although Dolmage’s analysis does not account for the beauty myth, I argue that it also functions in popular culture “to mark and construct disability as surplus, improper, lesser, or otherwise *other*” and to do so in non-explicit ways (p. 31).¹ As Dolmage further asserts, discretely, myths, including the beauty myth as I argue, reach into all bodies, but place particular attention on structuring roles for persons with a disability(s). As my analysis will elaborate, all characters are impacted by the beauty myth. For the non-disabled women characters, they physically embody traditional beauty and for the featured men, they seek this type of beauty in their potential heterosexual romantic interests. However, supporting Dolmage’s claim, I also find that these sketches place distinct attention on how the disabled woman character does not ascribe to the beauty myth. Thus, the attention she receives in a sketch is placed on how her role is characterized as Other and viewed as threatening to the social system through which she is deemed as abnormal.

Throughout this section, I have discussed how cultural norms of beauty and femininity shape normative ideals of the female body. Scholars have argued that a normative female body is one that is nondisabled. Therefore, female disabled bodies often are characterized and fictionally represented as not aligning with the beauty myth. Furthering this scholarship, in the following analysis I also argue that the disabled women character is defined as Other because her body does not embody traditional beauty.

¹ Types of myths that Dolmage does discuss include: disability as pathology; kill-or-cure outcome; overcoming or compensate as a supercrip; disability as object of pity and/or charity; physical deformity as sign of internal flaw; disability as isolating and individuated; disability as sign of social ill; disability as a sign from above; disability as symptom of human abuse of nature; disability drift and the disability hierarchy; and disability drop(ping the act).

Disabled Women and the Beauty Myth on *SNL*

Physically Disabled Women Characters on *SNL*

Before discussing the results of my study, I will first further introduce each of the four analyzed characters of this analysis. For this analysis, I focus on four physically disabled women characters from *SNL*: Dooneese, who has physical deformities and apparent mental disabilities; Sandy (also known as Baby Eve/Qrplt*xk in other sketches) who is a conjoined twin who has physical deformities; Amber, who has an amputated leg and additional physical disabilities; and Dusty Velvet, an exotic dancer who is newly paralyzed. Below, I provide context of these characters in these sketches to help further situate my analysis.

First, one of the most famous disabled women characters in the series was Dooneese, played by Kristen Wiig (2005-2012). Dooneese's character is featured in parody sketches of "*The Lawrence Welk Show*," a musical variety show that broadcasted on *ABC* from 1955-1982 and still broadcasts in syndication on *PBS*. In these parodies, Dooneese's character is featured performing with her three other sisters and are together known as the Maharelle Sisters. These fictional sisters originate from Finger Lakes, NY and together are always announced as the Maharelle/Finger Lakes sisters. However, as I will briefly summarize, this nickname holds irony regarding one of Dooneese's disabilities. While it is unclear exactly what disabilities Dooneese has, it is apparent that she has body deformities and does not speak or communicate very clearly with other people (it is often hard to hear or decipher her speaking). Her physical appearance is considered abnormal and grotesque. She has an extensively high forehead, a protruding tooth, and extremely small hands and arms (which is portrayed by Wiig holding baby doll arms in her sleeves). Mentally, she has a very high-pitched voice and is unable to state her name properly or

coherently sing. She also does not seem to interact very coherently with others.² These behaviors convey that Dooneese may have intellectual disabilities.

The next physically disabled women character that I will examine is Sandy, played by Rachel Dratch (1999-2006), who was featured in one sketch in 2003. In this sketch, Sandy is a non-identical conjoined twin with her sister Mandy. Unlike Mandy, Sandy has many other deformities and unattractive features that do not characterize her sister's appearance. Other than being conjoined at the arm, the sisters look nothing alike. As conjoined twins, Mandy is considered the traditional beauty with youthful features, including long blonde hair, a radiant smile and glowing face, and fitter physique; whereas Sandy is considered more aged and grotesque in appearance with a baby size arm and hand sticking out of her left side of her head, protruding and gaped teeth, a very short, almost buzzed cut hair, and a softer physique.

It is important to note that Sandy's physical appearance is almost identical to two other characters – Baby Eve (January, 2003) and Qrplt*xk (2000) – played by Rachel Dratch prior to the sketch with Sandy. These three characters have been discussed by viewers on internet forums interchangeably. Other than the differences of Sandy being a conjoined twin and the only character out of the three to speak, they share the same facial and body features. Both Baby Eve and Qrtplex appear in sketches featured on segments of “Weekend Update.” Here, the character of Baby Eve plays the first cloned human baby, and Qrplt*xk, although very similar to the mannerisms of Baby Eve, is presented as the love child between Angelina Jolie and her brother in one sketch and also as a fake mutant character from X-Men in another sketch. All three of these rather physically interchangeable characters are depicted as freaks. Because Sandy's

² In the first two sketches featuring Dooneese, she tries to act and sing/perform more with the sisters. Although her actions are presented as appalling and grotesque in all the sketches, her behaviors become much more heightened and deemed more grotesque over the years in later sketches.

character is more fully developed and not muted like the other two characters, for this analysis I will focus on how she is specifically represented as a freak through the burlesque/negative grotesque frame and also the positive grotesque.

The character of Amber, played by Amy Poehler (2001-2008), depicts a woman with an amputee who signals a progressive representation of a seldom portrayed disability. Other than freak show venues, historically literary representations have steered away from depictions of characters with an amputation. Because people are less likely to have real interactions with a person with an amputee than people with many other disabilities, viewers “rely more heavily on media imagery for cues” regarding this type of disability but have such few depictions to draw from (LeBesco, 2006; see also Barnes, 1992; Harris, 2002). Zola (1985) found television, in particular, to be conservative in the visual depictions of amputee characters. Likewise, LeBesco (2006) observed that Svetlana Kirilenko, a side character with an amputated leg in multiple episodes of HBO’s hit dramatic series, *The Sopranos*, was most often shown wearing a prosthetic leg. Her (fictional) stump was never visible, as she would be shown in long dresses or skirts when her prosthetic leg was not worn. This portrayal was also consistent with Heather Mills on *Dancing with the Stars*, who never revealed her stump and was always shown with a prosthetic leg on this reality TV competition show³ (Quinlan and Bates, 2008). Thus, the showing of Amber’s “stump” is potentially a progressive visual representation for amputees looking to identify with characters also showing their stumps, real or fake, on television.^{4 5}

³ Granted, Mill’s role as a dance contestant on that show made it necessary for her to rely on a prosthetic leg to make her performances stronger (in a traditional sense); however, not at any point in footage behind the scenes or in rehearsals was she ever shown without her leg. Instead, her leg became a part of her ‘almost passing’ identity and became a fetishized, sexual object for interested audience members to focus on as a point of interest in her role/the show (Quinlan and Bates, 2008).

⁴ I refer to the word stump in quotes due to the fact that Poehler is not shown wearing a molded looking stump at all. Rather, her leg is bent back and she tries to balance on one leg during the entire length of each sketch.

The last physically disabled woman character that will be discussed is Dusty Velvet, played by Casey Wilson (2008-2009), who appeared in one sketch entitled “Dusty Velvet” in 2008.⁶ Dusty, who has become recently paralyzed from the neck down in an accident, is an exotic dancer performing for the first time post-paralysis. Her dancer name, “Dusty Velvet,” may imply that she is old – a grotesque trope – or outdated and needs the chance to regain her status as an exotic dancer post-paralysis. As will be further discussed, through a burlesque framing, her performance is viewed by the featured male onlookers at the strip club as negatively representing the grotesque features of her dancing/body; whereas Dusty and the male Emcee view her performance through the positive grotesque.

Throughout the following analysis, I will discuss examples of how the two rhetorical framings are evident in sketches featuring disabled women. For each character, I will first discuss a burlesque/negative grotesque framing that ridicules and subjugates a disabled woman because of her disability and perceived lack of beauty. In these sections, I will discuss ways in which the grotesque aspects of a female disabled body are negatively highlighted by other characters, how some disabled women characters are juxtaposed as Other next to more able-bodied women, how each disabled woman character’s sexuality is shunned by others, and how the other characters view the exotic performance of a female disabled body through the stare. For the second part of my analysis, I will discuss a burlesque/positive grotesque framing, through

⁵ Amber’s presumed class – in many sketches she is described as only working part-time, low wage positions – may play a role in the fact that she does not wear a prosthetic leg and that is not part of her narrative, other than when she refused to receive a prosthetic leg for free in the makeover show, *The Swan*. It is also never mentioned how Amber ended up with a short leg, if it was a congenital amputation (birth defect) or amputated during her life. Also, the elements of Poehler having two legs and an aiming to dramatize the comedy may also play a role in why she does not wear a prosthetic leg.

⁶ This sketch largely mirrors a previous sketch that the actress playing Dusty, Casey Wilson, performed in 2006, prior to being a cast member on *SNL* (Garage Comedy Archive, 2009).

which disabled women characters proudly accentuate and flaunt their deemed grotesque bodies as it relates to their physical disabilities. In these sections, I first explain how these disabled women characters hold subjectivity in expressing their excessive sexuality, how their female disabled bodies further offer subversion, how their voices also complements their subversion, and lastly, how the disabled bodies are embraced by men characters in two sketches. I will now turn to my analysis of these characters more specifically.

Burlesque/Negative Grotesque: Ridicule and Shaming of the Female Disabled Body

Highlighting the Grotesque, Disabled Body

Throughout these sketches, the grotesque elements of these disabled women characters' bodies are ridiculed for not adhering to standards of traditional beauty. It is through the highlighting of her aberrant physical features that the narrative prosthesis of disabled woman as Other is reinforced. Within the confines of a burlesque framework, this normative position is reinforced by other non-disabled men and women characters highlighting the disabled woman's body through characterizations of the negative grotesque.

To begin with, concerning Dooneese's body, men characters most often negatively highlight and ridicule her for her physical deformities. At the end of almost every sketch the parody show announcer, Lawrence Welk, makes derisive comments regarding Dooneese's high, protruding forehead and sometimes her tiny hands/arms. He makes ridiculing comments such as: "Is it just me, or does one of them have a forehead that looks like the side of a cliff?" (S.35, E.10); "Is it me, or could you show a movie on that girl's forehead?" (S.36, E.18); "It is me, or does... she have a forehead that looks like a helicopter's windshield?" (S.37, E.22) "Did you see the girl with the forehead? I think it's very possible the hills are alive with radioactivity" (S.39, E.8); "I really think that woman should consider bangs (to cover up her protruding high

forehead);” and “Is it just me, or does that girl look like a melted Barbie doll? I think she does” (S.38, E.20). Then at this concluding point of each sketch, Dooneese is usually shown attempting to catch bubbles with her tiny hands. Welk is usually annoyed, repulsed, and at times fearful of the presence/actions of her tiny hands and arms. These comments made by the fictional Lawrence Welk occur at the end of the sketch after the conclusion of the interactive dialogue with all the other characters. These sketches reinforcement of normativity by ridiculing Dooneese’s deformities could have ended when the interactive dialogue did; however, the sketches continued to highlight how predominately non-disabled men characters define her deformed body as deviant and unattractive until the last shot of each scene. From the burlesque perspective, the discourse reiterates that Dooneese’s disabled body as grotesque is not a negotiable or revisable identity to be reworked by her in these sketches.

Beyond Welk’s comments, the featured men characters also heavily ridicule Dooneese for her deformities. In one sketch where her body is viewed as negatively grotesque, it is summer time and Dooneese introduces herself to the male lead and the audience by moving a beach ball from in front of her face to reveal herself. Once the male lead sees her face, he states that she “might want to put that up there” (referring to placing the ball back over her face) while he physically does so. When Dooneese moves the ball away from her face again, he states, “You hurt the sun’s eyes” (S.38, E.20). In another sketch that parodied the 2013 Live Television Musical, *The Sound of Music*, the Governess asks the Captain if Dooneese is human, and he replies that he cannot really tell (S.39, E.8). In many other sketches, once the male leads have met Dooneese they all try to reiterate their disinterest in and maintain their distance from her. Furthermore, Dooneese’s unattractiveness and deemed grotesqueness is also evident by her androgyny, specifically her partially unfeminine features coupled with feminine clothing, yet an

aged appearance. As will be further discussed, these features are especially highlighted when Dooneese is juxtaposed next to her more youthful and feminine looking sisters (Rowe, 1995). The male leads are always delighted to meet her sisters who demonstrate femininity, but are very displeased to interact with Dooneese. Overall, through these character's interactions, ableist norms of beauty for women characters are reinforced and upheld by her sisters but not by Dooneese. Dooneese represents a threat to the stability of normative thought concerning the body. Because she is considered a threat, she is ignored and shunned from substantial interactions with other characters.

Like Dooneese, both men and women characters also ridicule and shame Amber for her disabilities, especially ones that relate to her bodily displays of grotesqueness. Throughout the sketches, Amber is always depicted in some kind of reality TV competition show as desperately trying to win. Unlike the other contestants, Amber displays a grotesque body through which she purposely exaggerates her disabilities, including her amputated leg, hypoglycemia, Hepatitis B, Lyme disease, irritable bowel syndrome, excess flatulence that she proudly releases as she hops away at the end of each sketch, ringworm, nail fungus, eczema, "a mad case of bed bugs," "hardcore learning disabilities," and a third nipple (S.27, E.20; S.28, E.4; S.29, E.20; S.30, E.20; S.33, E.5; S.36, E.1). While the male lead in the dating competitions usually tries to ignore Amber and her grotesque displays of her disabilities, the other women contestants and male and female judges from other competition sketches are always annoyed and repulsed by the extent of her spectacle and mock her. They demean her disabilities that she purposely has highlighted in the sketch and blame her for any problems occurring during the scene. Unlike a comic framework where Amber would highlight her disabilities but then be accepted by others, in these sketches she remains in the burlesque and is always ostracized for her deemed negative

grotesque behaviors. Her role as an outcast is especially highlighted in the fact that she never wins the competitions.

For Sandy, a conjoined twin, she becomes burlesqued as she is rejected by her date, Frank, one of the featured men of the sketch. Initially, both featured men are very excited that they are going on a double date with twins that the one man, Joe, set up after meeting Mandy on the internet. Neither men seem uninterested once they realize the twins are conjoined. Because Joe focuses his attention solely on Mandy, who he finds very attractive, he is not repulsed by Sandy's appearance or the fact that they are conjoined. However, Frank is repulsed by the idea of dating Sandy, not necessarily because she is conjoined,⁷ but because of her other body deformities and unattractive facial appearances. As he disappointedly asks Joe, why can't I date "the hot one?," and then explains, "it just kind of looks like one of them had a little more time to cook than the other one" (S.28, E.12). Even though both sisters are considered disabled, Frank's facial expressions and physical distance from Sandy further demonstrates that she is defined as the grotesque twin.

Lastly, Dusty is also burlesqued by the featured men characters' negative reactions to her exotic dancing as a newly paralyzed female dancer. As will be further discussed in the performance section of the burlesque/negative grotesque, they are repulsed by the way her body moves and stare at her. In Dusty's sketch, the featured men characters construct how certain ability(s) of the female body are viewed as attractive and sexually arousing and ultimately seen as valuable. In the next section, I will further explain the burlesque/negative grotesque framing

⁷ In fact, neither men nor the sisters mention the word conjoined or disability. Specifically, Frank never mentions anything about being displeased with dating Sandy because of any actual physical disabilities. He is only repulsed by her freakish features. Whereas, Joe understands that Mandy is disabled, that characteristic does not deter his interest in dating her because of her attractive physical appearance. Frank, too, wants the opportunity to date Mandy and is not bothered by her disability.

through the juxtaposing of more able-bodied women next to a physically disabled woman who is positioned as Other.

Juxtapositioning of Disabled Woman as Other and Normative, Able-Bodied Women

The narrative prosthesis of disabled woman character as Other is further supported by the rhetorical juxtaposing of more feminine, able-bodied women next to the disabled woman character. Through this juxtapositioning, the normative ideals of ability, the body, and beauty are further reinforced. As will now be discussed, this reinforcement is further made evident by the featured men characters romantically seeking out the more feminine, able-bodied women and dismissing the disabled woman character due to their corporeal deviance.

For example, the juxtaposed depiction of Sandy as freak and Mandy as a more traditional beauty brings about important cultural understandings of ability and beauty. As Quinlan and Bates (2008) note, “Those who can pass as able-bodied, or most closely resemble it, are considered the most attractive” (p. 43; see also Brune & Wilson, 2013). It is obvious that Mandy, while still conjoined, represents this idea of almost passing through her attractive physical features and youthful/friendlier personality, especially when juxtaposed next to her sister. Mandy’s body as “almost passing” differentiates her from the freak’s body of Sandy by depicting her physical appearance and interactions with the men to more closely align with the cultural norms of beauty defined through the normative. These juxtapositions between Sandy and Mandy contradict the normative definition assigned to conjoined twins. Typically, conjoined twins would be assigned the same identity⁸ and jointly their bodies would represent the disruption of the boundary between self and other (Russell, 2011; Russo, 1995).

Regarding Sandy’s physical appearance and behaviors, the juxtaposing of the conjoined sisters represents what Garland-Thomson (1997a) refers to as “conceptual triangulation” (p. 29).

⁸ Even though, biologically and physically conjoined twins bodies’ can differ somewhat. (Dominus, 2011)

Sandy represents what Garland-Thomson further explains as “a cultural third term, defined by the original pair of the masculine figure and the feminine figure. Seen as the opposite of the masculine figure, but also imagined as the antithesis of the normal woman (which in this case Mandy more readily represents), the figure of the disabled female is thus ambiguously positioned both inside and outside the category of woman” (p. 29). Therefore, Sandy is defined through normative categorization – of how her body is not physically alike or completely aligned with either a traditional feminine or masculine figure – to create this “cultural third term” to categorize her corporeal difference as a freak.

Furthermore, by juxtaposing the ultra-feminine beauty exhibited by Mandy next to the freak appearance of Sandy further amplifies the paradox of defining women. According to Garland-Thomson (1997a), such juxtaposed depictions have the potential to destabilize “the very category of woman even while validating the standard notion of womanhood” (p. 71). This notion is especially highlighted at the end of the sketch when Sandy reveals that she is the only sister who physically has a vagina. Sandy states to Joe, who is kissing Mandy, “I got news for you, you can make out with her six ways to Sunday, but I'm the one with the vagina” (S.33, E.10). Being the only sister to have this part of a woman’s anatomy would typically more readily define Sandy as more normative than her sister, Mandy. However, the sketch concludes immediately after this revealing statement, so the audience does not get to see how Mandy’s body is perceived by not having a vagina. Following that statement, the only action made is an okay sign that Joe holds up while he is still making out with Mandy, which signals an ambiguous meaning. This action could mean that Joe is “okay” with the fact that Mandy is missing this body part or it could also signal that he will consider having vaginal intercourse with Sandy. Regardless of the largely uncertain or further unseen reactions to Sandy’s statement, the

juxtaposed portrayals of Sandy and Mandy further unsettles both the category of woman and the definition of traditional womanhood. Sandy is depicted as not representing the traditional appearance and behaviors (as will be further explained) of womanhood that Mandy exhibits; however, biologically, Sandy would be categorized more so as a woman than would Mandy. Thus, while science would define Sandy to be a woman categorically, culture would define her to represent a freak because of her grotesque physical appearance and behaviors which are deemed to be unfeminine. Ultimately, these cultural categorizations further attribute to how Sandy is characterized as a deviant and subsequently devalued (Garland-Thomson, 1997a).

For Dooneese, the way that she is treated by men characters also stands in stark opposition to the sexual interests that the lead man takes with the other “normative” looking sisters. The man is always relentless in his romantic quest for encounters with these other sisters and his specific desire to date each of them. However, regarding Dooneese, the man exhibits discomfort, disdain, repulsion, and at times even fear regarding the presence and actions of her persistent sexual desires. In one sketch, the male lead even asks the other sisters if Dooneese is really their sister and they respond yes.

This juxtapositioning is especially highlighted through the characterizing of Dooneese with a deformed body as a modern-day freak. Dooneese embodies many of the typical characteristics of a freak from historic freak shows, including a protruding head, deformed arms/hands, and enacting grotesque characteristics while remaining largely vocally muted. While all the disabled women characters do signal the construction of a freak, Dooneese especially represents this trope as her being is viewed as solely a physical body that signifies what Garland-Thomson (1997a) describes as a “spectacle of bodily otherness” (p. 17). This positioning of her otherness as solely physical dismisses her potential humanity (Garland-Thomson, 1997a).

Through this spectacle, her “different” physical and mental characteristics and behaviors contrast those of the other characters, mainly her sisters, and her otherness is variously marked through physical isolation throughout the sketches that is not as evident in scenes containing other disabled women characters. While all her sisters talk about potential male dating mates, Dooneese states that she falls in love with herself by herself (S.34, E.4), in another sketch she states, “Don’t have a partner to body surf (with)” (S.38, E.20), and eats dinner in the dark (S.36, E.18), and in another sketch she says she is only allowed on the second floor of her family’s house (S.35, E.21). Her isolation is further highlighted by how the male lead is not romantically interested in her and also how her family never wants to connect or collaborate with her. These other characters usually refuse to hold Dooneese’s small hands when she attempts to dance with her sisters or the male lead or when she tries to sexually touch him; rather, the other characters are scared and repulsed by her “abnormal” looking hands/arms and the male lead always pushes her off of the stage, often repeatedly.

As Garland-Thomson (1997a) highlights, “sanctioned femininity” is simultaneously “veiled and elaborated by way of its oppositional spectacle” (p. 71); in other words, the exaggeration of bodily details highlighted in the freak’s spectacle – in this case of Dooneese – distinguishes her from the other sisters who represent the proper embodiment of womanhood. She becomes banished to the margins by the normate – signified by the male characters in each sketch – who, according to Garland Thomson (1997a), “control the social discourse and the means of representation” and “recruit the seeming truth of the body to claim the center for themselves” (p. 62-63). It is the patriarchal perspective that claims the center throughout these sketches – specifically the superior demonstration of femininity by the other sisters juxtaposed next to Dooneese’s inferior behaviors as a freak.

Sketches featuring Amber also portray the juxtaposing of a disabled woman as Other next to the able-bodied and more feminine women contestants on reality TV programs. For example, the other characters in Amber-featured sketches are depicted as the “good guys” in the burlesque framing because their bodies and actions are aligned with normative thought, often visually standing in drastic contrast to Amber. While most of the other female contestants are considered more normative looking in their beauty, ironically they initially lack confidence and doubt their ability to be beautiful, sexually desirable, or win the contest. In a *Playboy* centerfold search sketch, the winning contestant, who ironically was the least confident but the most traditional looking in feminine appearance, stated that her stepfather was wrong about her being “trash” and now after winning expressed that she feels beautiful (S.27, E.20). Likewise, in *The Swan* sketch the winner, who is a non-disabled woman who becomes physically transformed to represent an image of traditional beauty, is stunned by the results of the cosmetic procedures – a now more normative, surgically enhanced body. However, when this contestant wins the contest, her feelings do not align with her new normative physical body; she states, “Oh, my God! I'm still so unhappy inside” (S.29, E.20). These contestants would be considered the “good guys” because they remain obedient to the strict rules of femininity, even when they doubt their ability to be beautiful or sexual. These two contestant winners are very surprised and elated to be fully accepted into the hegemonic standards of female beauty and in the end exhibit their soft, feminine side by crying upon winning the contest, as many of the winning contestants do in Amber-featured sketches.

In summary, similar to depictions of Dooneese and Sandy with their sister(s), the juxtaposing of Amber’s disabled body next to the able-bodies of the other contestants creates the theme of comparison that is common in narratives of disability (Mitchell & Snyder, 2001).

Throughout the sketches, Amber competes against more able-bodied and normative looking women who are considered to better embody traditional beauty. Even though these other women contestants are not the perfect embodiments of femininity, like Mandy in the conjoined twin sketch, their representations are also closer to the ideal norm of beauty and thus they are considered more attractive and desirable. Later in the positive grotesque section, we will see how these disabled women characters resist the ideals of the beauty myth by purposely drawing direct attention to her disabilities and associated grotesque characteristics. But first, in the next section I will continue to discuss how the disabled women characters are further Othered when they demonstrate sexuality that is shunned by others.

Shunned Sexuality

Connecting to a predisposed construction of women with disability(s), these depictions of disabled women characters also support some previous research of disabled persons as hypersexual. Coupled with their hypersexuality, these characters are also interpreted as negatively grotesque and their sexualized bodies are unsanctioned by others. Furthermore, these disabled women characters are almost always viewed as undesirable by the featured men characters. As will now be discussed, by these disabled women characters' sexuality being described by other characters as abnormal and undesirable, ableism is further reiterated in these sketches.

Beginning with Dooneese, she always communicates blatant sexual desires to each of the male leads, often trying to grab their crotch areas with her tiny hands after stating, "I like, can I touch?" or "Can I do your that" (S.34, E.22). When she expresses her romantic and sexual interest in the male leads, these men always firmly resist her and try to run away from her and/or

push her off the stage. They blatantly tell her to go away, and in one sketch the male lead even used the following language, “Come on. Go go, scram. Get oughta here, weirdo” (S.38, E.20).

Above and in many other sketches, Dooneese is treated like a child when she acts sexual around the leading men. For example, in another sketch Dooneese embraces a large crab that grabbed onto her crotch area; she stated “he found my down there” (S.38, E.20) and dances provocatively with the crab remaining on her crotch. The male lead is repulsed by her actions and tells her to go play in the sand and earlier in the water, which she does both times. As a demeaning characteristic assigned to the disabled woman/body specifically, Dooneese’s ongoing sexual desires are dismissed as unattractive and childlike and are not considered worthy of consideration or attention as legitimate sexual desires (Ellis, 2015).

Likewise, Amber exhibits overt sexuality when she states that her one leg can “go all night” (S.28, E.4). In particular, Amber sexually objectifies her leg, but no other characters find her leg or excessive sexuality to be attractive. Similarly, Sandy also demonstrates her sexuality by asking her date, Frank, if he wants to begin sexual acts and he abruptly gets angered and leaves the scene. Both Amber and Sandy are shamed for demonstrating their sexual and disabled bodies. Yet, we will see in the positive grotesque section how these two women characters subvert this shame.

The last character that I will discuss regarding her sexuality is Dusty, who as an exotic dancer, is expected to display overt sexuality. Because Dusty is paralyzed, her performance begins with her sitting in a chair and dancing as she is moved around through the assistance of the Emcee, Donnie. In the first part of the song, Dusty stays in her chair and Donnie assists her by helping move her arms and body parts while he gradually begins to help her remove her clothes. In the second half of the song, Donnie picks Dusty up from behind and moves her body

while she moves and uses her voice and face in sensually purposeful ways. Meanwhile, the featured men sitting at the strip club seem confused as to why a paralyzed woman would want to dance exotically, and throughout her routine they become disgusted by her body and facial movements. Near the end of her routine, Dusty, being held up by Ronnie, licks the face of one of the featured men in the audience as he screams in horror. Yet, it appears that Dusty is oblivious to or ignores the reactions of these men and confidently states, “Dusty's back! Whoo-hoo!” (S.33, E.10).

Typically, exotic dancers are presented in sexually objectifying manners which encourages the audience to find them attractive and to focus on certain body parts that align with standards of embodied beauty. As such, in this sketch the featured men expected to see a female dancer who looked and acted in ways that align with such traditional standards of beauty. Instead, they were unpleasantly surprised to visually encounter the presence and body of a disabled woman.

While Dusty is never physically shunned from the scene, she does become an outcast. While the featured men soon learn that Dusty is disabled, they still give her a chance to perform in ways that might suggest that she is “almost passing” (Quinlan & Bates, 2008; Scott, 2015). In doing so, Dusty utilizes her performance to prove that she can still be viewed as sexually desirable. Like Ellen Stohl, Dusty desires to uphold her standard of normative beauty that she exhibited pre-paralysis (Ellis). However, by the end of the sketch it is evident that Dusty has been subjugated, not physically, but mentally, as the featured men all agree that her performance was undesirable and very grotesque. They do not seem to be interested in seeing any of her future performances. Thus, Dusty’s performance, possibly inadvertently, signals ways in which she has exhibited the negative grotesque by exploring her body’s potential outside of the realm

of normate ability and beauty. Her body moves in ways that further reiterates the grotesque body as incomplete, one that can never be fully contained to the fixed notion of a classic body.

Ultimately, Dusty utilizes her body in ways that go against the ableist norms of capacities for exotic dancing specifically. Her depiction shows that exotic dancers must uphold certain abilities and standards of beauty in order to provide a sexually enticing performance to heterosexual men characters. In the next and last section applying a burlesque/negative grotesque framework, I will continue to analyze Dusty's performance, paying particular attention to the concepts of the male gaze and the stare.

Viewing Performances of a Female Disabled Body: The Gaze and the Stare

In performances containing the female body, the concept of the male gaze is essential to understanding her positioning in an image, on stage, etc. Yet, for a disabled woman, her body does not commend the gaze, but rather a stare. The stare provides another way in which disabled women characters are Othered. Continuing my analysis of how these women characters' otherness is constructed, in this section I will discuss the concepts of the gaze and the stare as they specifically relate to viewing the female disabled body during Dusty's performance.

As performers, disabled persons are typically represented in two opposing ways: through marginality/invisibility and hypervisibility, which are both interconnected tropes of the grotesque woman (Rowe). As Koppers (2004) explains, in one regard they are not portrayed as performers but simply as disabled people; in another way, people with physical impairments are represented as hypervisible, "instantly defined by their physicality" (p. 49). As will be further discussed in this section, as a disabled performer Dusty's portrayal fits within this dichotomy. Once her physical disability is revealed, the featured men no longer view Dusty as a performer to gaze at, but as a disabled person to stare at. Thus, while her performance becomes irrelevant to the men,

her physical disabilities are spotlighted as the men stare in shock by the movements of her paralyzed body. This portrayal confirms Kupper's dichotomous observations: disabled persons with physical impairments are considered largely invisible as active members interacting in the public sphere; yet, they are made hypervisible in representations in popular culture, all the while considered to be passive consumers and victims portrayed in such narratives (Kuppers, 2004).

More directly, because the image of the female dancer in western culture reinforces the characteristics of femininity, including beauty, youthfulness and sexual attractiveness, this type of performance typically prompts the male gaze (Cooper Albright, 1997; Quinlan and Bates, 2008). When audience members view images of a female dancer, contradictions emerge regarding how they may assign meaning to her body. First, as Quinlan and Bates (2008) summarize, "the female dancing body is often the object for a traditional, 'patriarchal' reading of femininity," often a type of performance that invites the gaze (p. 73). As Mulvey (1975) defines it, the male gaze is when women are positioned to embody 'to-be-looked-at-ness' in film by the lens focusing on their body parts rather than the whole person. The gaze creates a gender dichotomy regarding the pleasure of looking – men actively look and women are passively displayed as sexual objects.

Garland-Thomson (1997a; 2009) furthers the concept of the male gaze pertaining to the spectacle of the physically disabled body. She (1997a) states:

If the male gaze makes the normative female a sexual spectacle, then the stare sculpts the disabled subject into a grotesque spectacle. The stare is the gaze intensified, *framing her body as an icon of deviance*. Indeed...the stare is the gesture that creates disability as an oppressive social relationship. And as every person with a visible disability knows intimately, managing, deflecting, resisting, or renouncing that stare is part of the daily business of life. (p. 26)

This explanation rings true especially for Dusty, who as a disabled female exotic dancer, first prompts the gaze and then the stare. Initially, the featured men willingly and with a sense of

entitlement gaze upon Dusty and her body. However, once they quickly become aware of her physical disability, they begin to stare. Their staring first represents confusion and astonishment and then begins to demonstrate horror as they witness images of a disabled woman's performance that do not abide by the patriarchal gaze. As Garland-Thomson (2009) explains, "we may gaze at what we desire, but we stare at what astonishes us," often extraordinary bodies that are deemed as freaks (p. 13). She (1997a) adds that disability cues negative staring and, in turn, reduces a woman's value in society. Thus, as the featured men move beyond the gaze and begin to stare, they determine that Dusty's value as an erotic object has been nullified. Her disabled body does not command the lens of the gaze as her pre-paralyzed body once did. As Koppers observes, "disability (culturally) denies positivity – the body signals its (cultural) meaning of tragedy" (p. 95). Through the normative definition of disability, the featured men find her body to signal a tragic connotation, an unwarranted presence that cannot be celebrated or gazed upon but only feared and looked upon with dismay. Furthermore, because the gaze becomes the stare within the spectacle, Dusty does not possess transformative potential to manipulate the gazes of the male audience members (Mulvey, 1975; Rowe, 1995). Because of her disability, her visibility is unwarranted on the stage and is ultimately seen as negatively grotesque by onlookers.

Overall, the positioning of Dusty through the stare furthers how she differs from potential able-bodied women exotic dancers. For the men characters, her disability, as is apparent through her body movements, rather immediately diminishes her sexuality. The lacking in appeal, both sexually and through inability, further strengthens the normative frame that assigns meaning to the disabled woman's body. As my analysis of Dusty's performance demonstrates, the interlocking categories of ability and (hetero)sexuality are essential to characterizing a woman's

attractiveness and sexual appeal. From this normative perspective, a woman needs to have bodily ability in order to demonstrate her heterosexuality in ideologically desirable ways; likewise, a non-disabled woman's body is contained by the expectations that she will exhibit "appropriate," feminine sexual appeal. Thus, this depiction of Dusty signals the complexities of assigning meaning to a disabled woman's sexuality specifically. Now, in the second large section of this analysis, I will explain themes pertaining to how these disabled women characters subvert the notions of the beauty myth and, at times, transform female body shame.

Burlesque/Positive Grotesque Framing: Accentuate and Flaunt

Countering the hegemonic aspects of the portrayals of disabled women characters on *SNL*, in the following sections I will now discuss how these characters transgress the limits of their contained identities from mute, asexual, childlike, and unattractive to subjectively displaying a deviant spectacle of their bodies in which they resist normative behaviors. By often utilizing a dominant voice and physical appearance, these characters are able to craft a subversive presence within the public sphere and are able to do so on their own terms as disabled women. As they transgress the limits of the beauty myth and normative thought regarding disability, these women characters variously enact overt sexuality, other bodily and vocal subversions, and also serve as the reason that two male characters embrace these women's disabled bodies/grotesqueness.

Subjectivity and Sexuality

As discussed above regarding the negative grotesque, these disabled women characters exhibit overt sexualities that are unwarranted by other characters. Unaffected by these other character's dismay of their sexualized bodies, the disabled women characters continue to represent overt sexuality and in the process hold agency and resist cultural norms. As will be

further discussed, these disabled women characters proudly accentuate and flaunt their sexual, disabled bodies in the face of normativity.

To begin with, Amber always exudes extreme confidence about her physical appearance, especially her “one leg” as she always defines it (as stated above, she does not wear a prosthetic leg), and her overt sexuality that she usually displays in dialogue and through the mannerisms of her body. Unlike the many other contestants in these sketches, who display more normative appearances of traditional beauty and femininity but lack confidence in their bodies, Amber flamboyantly shines by overtly displaying ultra-confidence and being provocative. Amber uses her main disability – her amputation – and other disabilities to further display confidence in her body. Amber often describes her disabled body very seductively. For example in a sketch of a playboy centerfold contest she states that she exhibits “non-stop hotness, hardcore sexuality, hypoglycemia, a big patch of eczema, and one very sex leg. Say hello to Miss July. I got to eat these nuts to keep my blood sugar right. Yea, you like it” (S.27, E.20). Throughout many sketches Amber very proudly emphasizes her attractiveness and sexual drive while also coupling those features with her multiple disabilities, conditions, and deformities that are listed above. Furthermore, Amber proudly believes that her amputated leg makes her unique and thus more beautiful and desirable than the other female contestants. For example, in most sketches she proudly states, “I’m rocking one leg. Jealous?,” and in one sketch in particular she declares that “this one leg can go all night” (S.28, E.4). Additionally, in a sketch of *The Swan*, an extreme body makeover show, the plastic surgeon mentions that Amber “refused to do any cosmetic or dental surgery,” including receiving a prosthetic leg because she does not want it to “slow down access to her lady parts” (S.29, E.20). While Amber bluntly emphasizes the disabled and sexual

aspects of her body, she never embarrasses or demeans the abilities and bodies of the other contestants like the others do to her.

Amber's character also works hard to resist the category of asexuality that typically defines disabled people. As Skakespeare (1996) notes, "sexual agency is considered the essential element of full adult personhood, replacing the role formerly taken by paid work" (p. 192). However, because disabled persons are thought of as childlike and often denied active employment, their sexual agency is weakened. Contrastingly, Amber does try to achieve full personhood by making her sexuality very apparent. Yet, because of her disabilities and associated grotesque acts, her sexuality is considered less or completely undesirable by normative terms, thus hindering her from achieving full personhood.

Only in one sketch, *Rock of Love II*, is Amber's amputated leg considered somewhat attractive. Here, Amber throws a piece of chicken mcnugget that she was eating at the lead male character, the "good guy," the bachelor/love interest, Rock musician Bret Michaels (played by Jason Sudeikis). He responds:

Bret: Look Amber, I got to tell you, I just can't figure you out.

Amber: Good! I don't wanna be figured out!

Bret: You're very complicated.

Amber: You're very complicated!

Bret: And you only got one leg.

Amber: Duh!!

Bret: Which I got to say, I find a little sexy.

Amber: Yeah, I know you do. (S.33, E.5)

Earlier in this sketch, Amber described the attractiveness – "hotness" – of her one leg. Amber is the first one to bring up and link her one leg to notions of beauty and sexuality. Then, Bret also highlights her leg and associates it as being "a little sexy" (S.33, E.5). In one sense, Bret helps Amber somewhat achieve a fuller personhood by identifying that he finds her disability to be a bit attractive. Yet, in the end of this sketch and all the other ones Amber never wins the

competition or gains the respect of the other contestants or judges. The more normative, able bodied persons (who define disability) do not accept Amber or validate her disabilities; this validation would be required to achieve the status of full personhood (Klobas, 1988). At the end of each scene, Amber is either one of or the only contestant that has to leave the competition/show. Here, Amber uses these opportunities to counter the denial of her personhood by trying to own the fact that she is being asked to leave. As previously mentioned, every time she loses the contests, Amber smugly states, “I don’t care” and then discusses ways in which she will be appreciated by others and victorious in competing in other television reality TV shows.

For Sandy, , her overt sexuality further demonstrates her deviance, and leads to how she resists being devalued by proudly displaying her grotesque body. In her one featured sketch, Sandy remains very interested in having sexual relations with Frank, but Frank resists wanting to get to know and/or being intimate with her. Being forward, Sandy tries to initiate relations:

Sandy: You want to get this thing going or what?

Frank: I just....I usually like, you know, have a conversation...

Sandy: There you go. Telling a lady what she thinks she wants to hear. Cut the small talk, cowboy!

Frank: Cowboy?

Sandy: Look, they're off and running. Believe me, we better keep up a pace with them. You do not want to be starting when they're finishing, believe me. (S.28, E.12)

Following this conversation, Frank realizes that he is not interested in dating Sandy just because she is a twin and or as a favor to Joe. At the beginning of the sketch, Frank very enthusiastically agreed with Joe that he wanted to partake in the more masculine activities of drinking beer, watching football, and eating pizza while trying to enact sexual relations with the twins coming to the apartment. However, once Frank meets Sandy he does not try to sit near her or look directly at her; he hopes that he can avoid Sandy and date Mandy instead. By the end of the sketch Franks angrily states: “Ok, you know what? I do not like twins! I do not like football on

tv! And I'm not even sure who Gena Lee is! And beer?! I prefer a nice Merlot! Ok?! That's right! And I think I just...I'm just grown up here now! OK! I AM OUTTA HERE!" (S.28, E.12). He then slams the door and leaves the apartment. In response, Sandy does not seem to be bothered by Frank's reactions to her. She then grabs a large slice of pizza and begins eating while simultaneously telling Joe that she is the sister with the vagina.

Here, Sandy embraces the spectacle that her physical deformities and deemed grotesqueness creates. While Sandy offers herself sexually to both men, like all the other analyzed disabled women characters she also does not seem to care if these men accept her sexually or find her to be attractive. She exudes confidence in her body and sexuality regardless of the other characters' reactions.

Dusty also demonstrates such confidence and disregard for the featured men's reactions. Initially, it is apparent that Dusty intently tries to fit into the beauty standards of an exotic dancer that she previously embodied. However, by remaining as an exotic dancer and confidently presenting her post-paralysis body and assisted movements to an audience, Dusty presents a spectacle that she both embraces and finds to be sexually appealing and desirable. At the beginning of her performance, Dusty proclaims that her impairment "will not paralyze her spirit" or define her. She assures the audience that she "will continue to do what I do best, which is dance erotically" (S.33, E.10). Through the spectacle, Dusty unknowingly defies the boundaries and cultural norms regarding how a sexualized body appears and communicates when dancing exotically. She demonstrates that the sexualized body and overall the exotic dance performance does not have to be presented in fixed, passive, or regimented ways that strictly align with the patriarchal definitions of femininity and sexuality.

Furthermore, Dusty defies the notion that the spectacle is for the benefit of her male audience only; instead, she “lays claim to her own desire” by gaining pleasure from her routine, telling the audience how sensual her performance is while dancing (Rowe, p. 31). While feeling this pleasure, she does not communicate any feelings of shame regarding embracing the alternative moves of her newly physically disabled body nor does Donnie place any shame on her. Dusty derives pleasure from her subjectivity – from her ability to continue dancing erotically post-paralysis on her own terms. Overall, her body signifies corporeal deviance through the ways that she strategizes choreographing her performance through alternative dance moves. In the next section, I will further discuss examples of these characters’ subversive behaviors through other aspects of their bodies.

Other Types of Bodily Subversion

Beyond displaying overt sexuality, these disabled women characters also subvert cultural norms through other bodily behaviors. These characters use their disabilities and other grotesque behaviors to further subvert shame that is placed on their bodies. Their bodies variously create spectacles that represent excess and visibility that is unsanctioned by the other characters.

For example, Amber willingly objectifies her leg,⁹ thus creating a spectacle. She pursues and embraces a spectacle by using excessiveness to draw attention to herself and her disabilities. According to Russo (1995), inviting a spectacle is a danger to femininity, specifically because of exposure. Russo observes that when a woman makes a spectacle it signifies “a loss of boundaries” that signals grotesqueness, such as unfeminine, unregimented appearances and/or behaviors that may include revealing unfit or aged bodies, laughing too hard, and also in the case

⁹ According to Quinlan & Bates, the objectification of one body part positions a sexualization of that person, especially for women.

of Amber, drawing attention to a physical disability (p. 53). Amber looks for various ways to position a spectacle of herself *for herself*, including her voice and behaviors that promote a hyperbolic sexuality as previously discussed and also overt visibility, overindulgence, and uncleanliness. In doing so, Amber and as we will see with the other characters, variously enact what Rowe refers to as “visibility as power...to affect the terms on which she is seen” (p. 11; see also Russo). In so doing, the use of visibility aids in transforming associated shame typically assigned to bodies that enact such unruly, grotesque behaviors.

More specifically, through the carnivalesque Amber’s actions highly transgress the standards of how a traditional woman should demonstrate femininity. Pertaining to her hypoglycemia, Amber celebrates her need to eat excessively (as she either mentions and/or consumes food while on these contestant shows) and in the process enacts grotesqueness (Rowe). For example, in the *Playboy* centerfold sketch, the winning contestant asks the others if someone has passed gas and Amber proudly replies that it was her because she just ate peanuts to balance her blood sugar. In other sketches, she devours food by, for example, smearing chocolate covered strawberries across her mouth to maintain her blood sugar, eating a whole can of sardines, and taking a bag of McDonald’s fast food items – French fries and chicken nuggets – and emptying it into her mouth all at once with a single fry remained dangling from her mouth afterward (S.33, E.5). Then, often in her most famous line of these sketches, Amber asks the other contestants and judges if they are “Jealous?” – pertaining to people’s dismay of the grotesqueness enacted through her displays of disability, specifically related to overeating, excessive flatulence, and walking on one leg.

Throughout these narratives the carnivalesque is evident through the emergence of two competing discourses: the traditional embodied beauty of the other women contestants

juxtaposed next to Amber's excessive display of grotesque features and indulgences. The carnivalesque is evident through contrasting images and behaviors that either align with or disrupt the conventions of cultural norms regarding the body. Amber not only represents disruption through the grotesque, but also variously mocks the feminine standards of the traditional women that are depicted by the other contestant characters. In so doing, Amber's character pushes beyond the "play" aspects of the carnivalesque to focus on relevant matters of social critique regarding how we understand and assign meaning to the identity categories of women, disability, and beauty.

Likewise, Sandy's behaviors also represent excess and visibility. Specifically, Sandy's eating while discussing her sexuality and mentions her vagina reinforces the notion of the unruly, grotesque woman. As Rowe (1995) states, the mouth – from where a woman freely or excessively speaks, eats, laughs – represents "a more generalized version of that other, more ambivalently conceived female orifice, the vagina" and together implies "an intrinsic relation among female fatness, female garrulousness, and female sexuality" (p. 37). Sandy's eating while simultaneously talking about her vagina especially emphasizes these connections between indulging, speaking, and sexuality that characterize the grotesque woman as excessive and dangerous. As Pelle (2010) describes, the excessive mouth has both mythical and psychological connections to the "ever-feared and ever-powerful 'black hole,' the vagina" (p. 22; see also Rowe and Russo). Thus, like the vagina, Sandy's excessive mouth also represents danger, and this threat is ever more apparent by Sandy highlighting the fact that she has a vagina. In the sketch, the audience is led to follow how Mandy represents beauty and feminine sexuality and how Sandy depicts the characteristics of a freak. In one way, by Sandy revealing that she has a vagina she disrupts this flow of characterizations by greatly decreasing Mandy's womanhood

while potentially enhancing Sandy's womanhood. Yet in another way, because the vagina is considered a dangerous threat and can be associated as embodying grotesqueness, her drawing attention to this body part further disassociates her from potential womanhood and from being characterized as more feminine. In either case, Sandy holds subjectivity over her own sexuality. Unashamed of her disfigured body, she openly expresses her sexual desires without any hesitation.

Dusty also demonstrates bodily subversion as a disabled exotic dancer. Her newly physically disabled body has changed how she moves and dances; now, her body communicates a grotesqueness of incompleteness, process, and change that cannot be readily defined for or by an audience at the strip club (Bakhtin, 1968; Rowe, 1995; Russo, 1995). Because of such variance, Dusty holds the power and control regarding her body and the many ways in which it may move through assistance in a performance. In so doing, the depiction of Dusty represents a type of disability performance that Koppers (2004) observes can challenge what is considered to be 'natural,' provide subjectivity to this outcasted character, and, in turn, create a representation of "a body clearly complete on its own terms" (p. 52). As Koppers (2004) further argues, "Out of layers of negativity and critique emerges a position of challenge, a living presence that breathes fluidity and change into encrusted aesthetic frames" (p. 52). Overall, Dusty represents such a grotesque portrayal of change that challenges dominant understandings of women, ability, sexuality, and beauty in regards to exotic dancing specifically.

Lastly, through her behaviors in which she embraces the extreme grotesque, Dooneese also represents many examples of bodily subversions. Although each sketch frames her deformities/actions in repulsive ways, Dooneese's responses to such subjugation of her body reiterates the positive grotesque tropes of resisting confinement, marginality, and patriarchal

dominance (Rowe). Even though she is both confined and marginalized when she is shunned from the stage by each male lead and also is discussed in ways that degrade her appearance and define her as negatively grotesque, Dooneese resists (possibly unknowingly due to a potential intellectual disability) these categories/subjugation. She appears right back in the sketch, stating and doing even more grotesque actions and remains too visible for the other characters comfort level. Regardless if Dooneese is aware of her resistance or not, she does not allow the cultural norms of femininity and beauty to dictate and dominate her behaviors. Instead, Dooneese continues to make a spectacle by happily telling and enacting parts of very grotesque stories about her interactions with animals and nature.

Specifically, Dooneese sings about extremely grotesque stories often involving her and animals, sometimes even sexually, and is also shown frolicking with animals during several sketches. The content of these songs are rather intricately developed and deeply grotesque, representing extreme abjection regarding human interactions with animals/nature. For example, she tells stories about cooking and/or eating dead animals and insects, including cats, squirrels, worms, putting a bird and frog in her mouth, dreaming that she ate a squirrel, letting a crab remain on her crotch area and dancing with it there, having a fish swim up her skirt and enjoying it remaining there, drinking water from a water statue, licking sand, and licking and eating dirt. Beyond eating animals, Dooneese also has other interactions with them, such as letting a bobcat sleep at the foot of her bed, hitting a turkey with a shovel and then putting it in her toilet, sowing a chicken to a wall and a toilet, a squirrel forcing his tail in her mouth, letting a bird eat peanut butter off of her ear, and using water out of a bird bath fountain to wash her underarms. In a couple of songs, Dooneese also potentially alludes to sexual stories involving sleeping with animals and when she woke up her underwear was gone.

These depictions with animals and nature further foreground the taboo and visceral aspects of the positive grotesque and also a freak (Peterson, 1996; Rowe, 1995; Russo, 1995). Obviously, Dooneese has a connection to and fascination with animals. While Dooneese continually attempts to interact with humans, they do not accept or value her grotesque body and behaviors. It appears that the animals may be her friends because they do not subjugate her as the humans do. Her unusual interactions with animals and nature provide examples of how one indulges with the forbidden/hidden aspects of human desires. These interactions with animals are seen as uncleanly and unhealthy abject behaviors that are ultimately forbidden in society. Specifically, exploring unconventional and often forbidden relationships with animals – at times violent, possibly bestial – represents the carnivalesque behaviors that humans are supposed to suppress.

Throughout the above sketches, these disabled women characters further demonstrate grotesqueness through the incompleteness of their disabled bodies and their excessive, non-normative behaviors. As Rowe (1995) highlights, grotesque acts of excess and outrageousness can “evoke ambivalence through delight on the one hand, and unease, derision, or fear on the other” (p. 30). While other characters may fear and often mock them, these disabled women revel in their grotesque performances of excess and outrage. They are not ashamed of their corporeal differences and, for most of them, they intently enact deviant behaviors to disassociate themselves from the cultural norms both regarding the traditional, feminine woman and the expectations for the actions of a disabled woman. In the next section, I will further highlight aspects of subversion via these character’s voices.

Vocal Subversion

As already more broadly discussed above, these characters' voices also subvert the ideologies of the female disabled body. Their voices further support the corporeal deviance that is created and reinforced through their presence. More specifically, their voices add to the disruptive elements of their grotesque spectacle by speaking too loud, excessively, and/or sarcastically.

Beginning with Amber, she makes jokes about her disabilities, and joking is also another trope of the grotesque woman (Rowe). Amber ironically acknowledges and owns her disabilities, but not through the sick role, in which others are supposed to sympathize with her (Quinlan and Bates, 2008). For example, in the *America's Next Top Model* sketch when competitively speaking to the other contestants and judges about why she should win this contest, she concludes her plea with "take a walk, bitches, 'cause I can't!" and then verbally cheers to everyone else (S.30, E.20). In this ironic, subversive plea, she is conveying to the other contestants that she is going to win (so they should walk away now), while also highlighting her disability even more so. Further, throughout this sketch Amber is asked to pose with the other contestants in mini-competition games and repetitively falls because of her amputated leg. When falling, Amber first assures the other characters that falling makes her unique and a better candidate to win the show and then after she falls again, she states that she meant to do it. Through these actions, Amber's character aligns with an "authentic" self (LeBesco, 2006). Amber is characterized as being independent and sassy, able to talk back to the normate male or female lead characters/judges and is free from such control of normative ideals. When Amber does lose the contests that she desperately wants to win, she does not become sad or dwell on the

loss. Instead, she reassures the other characters that losing is fine by her. In very sassy ways, she always reiterates that she will enter other contests to win and/or find other people to accept her.

Likewise, when many of the contestants and judges belittle Amber for blatantly celebrating her disabilities and sexuality she resists and transgresses such comments through sarcasm. In the *Playboy* sketch, another contestant ridicules Amber for verbally celebrating her disabilities. The contestant yelled to her, “Shut up pogo stick,” and Amber responded, “Why don’t you shut up, two shoes” (S.27, E.20). Similarly, in a sketch of *The Bachelor* when the decision is about to be made, Amber warns to another female contestant, “You’re going down, ten toes.” This contestant responds, “At least I have two legs,” and then Amber states, “At least I have two self-respects” (S.27, E.20). In these sketches by Amber subversively mocking the other contestant for having ten toes or the capability to wear two shoes, she exhibits the positive grotesque potential of a burlesque scene. Amber’s responses defy the normative thought that having two legs/feet is more proper or better than one leg. Amber truly revels in the uniqueness of her one leg and refuses to let anyone belittle her because of it. As LeBesco (2006) notes, “Seeing someone (a character) who doesn’t mourn their state of difference from a norm makes us question why we value the norm as much as we do” (p. 50; see also Hillyer, 1993). Thus, this portrayal of Amber counters cultural understandings and standards of conventional beauty as it relates to a disabled woman’s body specifically.

More specifically, Amber’s sarcastic defenses aid in transforming associated shame of her disabled body. By crafting sarcastic responses to the other character’s demeaning comments, in turn, Amber throws the shame that is communicated to her back onto the perpetrators – the other characters – by variously reinforcing to them that they are not better than her nor do their potential abilities trump her abilities/body (Pelle, 2010). In doing so, Amber does not only

radically change the negative meanings of her grotesque body, but also has shifted shame back onto those people that try to belittle her. These subversive depictions of Amber utilizing her voice further demonstrate how ableist ridiculing can be overthrown by a disabled person.

Beyond the physical aspects of her performance, Dusty also speaks excessively when she continually instructs Donnie on how to move her body during the dance routine and also when she provides the audience with verbal cues of the upcoming dance moves. The inclination of her voice is also higher while trying to instruct Donnie and prepare the audience for what is coming next. Because she does not speak in a feminine, soft voice, Dusty's higher tone would also be considered unattractive (Rowe). Furthermore, Dusty's speaking while dancing further disrupts the objectification of an exotic dance routine, specifically by resisting muteness that typically accompanies such a type of performance, especially that of a woman.

Lastly, Sandy's speaking excessively, loudly, and candidly in a more masculine tone also demonstrates her dominance in her interactions with her blind date with Frank. Even though Frank variously tries to ignore interacting with her, Sandy still sustains and also dominates conversation with him. Their interactions stand in opposition to the conversation dynamics between the other couple, Mandy and Joe. When Mandy speaks to Joe she does not try to dominate the conversation, but has a softer tone of voice and relies on a lot of smiling, giggling and twirling the ends of her hair as they closely interact. The idea of a woman holding more power in a conversation with a man, especially a physically grotesque woman, transgresses cultural norms regarding interactions between potential heterosexual mates.

Overall, these physically disabled women characters' voices play an integral role in subverting cultural norms of ability, the body, and gender. Their subversive voices provide another outlet for resistance to destabilize the ideologies of ability that define their bodies as

Other. Not only do their voices add to the transgressions of the beauty myth, but they also defy the confinement of a disabled person's voice in popular culture. These representations convey that their voices are not contained by patriarchal guidelines regarding a woman's place or lack thereof in public culture. In the final section of this analysis, I will now discuss the transformative power posed by two physically disabled women to entice two men characters to disregard normative thought and embrace the grotesque, disabled female body.

Male Acceptance/Embracing of the Grotesque

Throughout all of the analyzed sketches, featured men characters ridicule and reject the romantic and/or sexual advances posed by the physically disabled women characters. Only in two sketches listed below do two men characters embrace the bodies of these disabled women characters. In doing so, these men characters also do not adhere to the normative position as they find value in the disabled woman's body. For one man, he embraces Dusty's post-paralyzed body the entire sketch, and for the other man character, he eventually accepts Dooneese's abject body.

Specifically, in the sketch featuring Dusty, Donnie – the Emcee – finds her body and movements post-paralysis to be very attractive. As he announces her to the audience, he describes her as “a sweet piece of cabbage...someone so sensational, so erotic” (S.33, E.10). While each of the disabled women characters' appreciates and celebrates their grotesque bodies, Donnie's character is the only other featured character throughout such themed sketches who initially and directly states that a woman's disabled body is attractive – highly erotic as he stated.¹⁰ Even after Donnie has used a lot of physical strength to pick Dusty up and help her

¹⁰ As will be discussed below, the male lead at the end of the last recurring sketch featuring Dooneese does accept her and embrace her body deformities, but does not vocally state that he finds her to be attractive. And as previously discussed, in one sketch featuring Amber, the male lead parodying Bret Michaels does state that he finds her amputated leg to be a “little sexy,” but does not fully embrace her disabilities through his words or actions.

move and strip throughout her performance, he becomes exhausted but does not place blame on Dusty's new condition for his tiredness or for being a potential hindrance to his role as the Emcee. Donnie stated, "Oh! That was a freakin' workout! [he catches his breath] That was a smokin' HOT babe! Dusty Velvet, everyone!" (S.33, E.10). Here, Donnie's character does not work to burlesque Dusty as the other men characters do in this sketch or as other characters even more aggressively and/or blatantly do in other sketches featuring disabled women. Although Donnie struggles to assist and carry Dusty in a choreographed manner of precision, by embracing the grotesque they both view the performance as a success.

Concerning Dooneese, only in one situation is her grotesqueness eventually deemed as acceptable by one of the male leads who is eventually rejected by the other sisters (S.37, E.22). Earlier in this sketch, the male lead is only interested in the other sisters and is immediately repulsed by Dooneese's appearance and behaviors, especially when she tries to grab his crotch and also reveals that she moved her bowels in the gondola. Then, towards the end of the sketch the male lead is disappointed after the other sisters state that they cannot stay with him in Italy. In response he sings, "Just my luck. Alone again," and then Dooneese sings, "No you're not, you've got a friend," while she touches his chin with her wet, tiny hand (S.37, E.22). She then goes into her long narrative that she sings towards the end of the sketch: "I sleep in a barrel and I eat in a barrel. Yes, I live in a barrel. I met a squirrel in a barrel. He put his tail in my mouth and he wouldn't take it out and then I fell asleep and I dreamt I ate a hairy hot dog. When I woke up he was gone and my panties were gone. Is that bad? Da do do do do do." He desperately responds, "Wait, no, that's not bad" (S.37, E.22). Here, the male lead only considers her in a desperate attempt to have a romantic companion after he cannot pursue the other sisters. While there is positivity in his embracement of her grotesqueness, it only happens as a last resort for

romance. While before he blatantly rejected Dooneese, at the end of the sketch he kisses her, and then he seductively sucks on her wet, tiny hand. In return, Dooneese winks at the audience. The sketch concludes with Lawrence Welk stating, “Isn’t love beautiful when it’s gross?” (S.37, E.22). This time Dooneese and the male lead are both shown together grabbing bubbles with their hands.

In this sketch, the male lead does something that rarely happens at the end of a burlesque scene: he becomes a part of the burlesque and embraces the grotesque. The male lead leaves the symbolic order and joins Dooneese in the maternal, fully embracing her deformities and grotesque behaviors. This is also significant because this is the last scene featuring Dooneese as a regular recurring character. This unusual ending demonstrates that by Dooneese being embraced by someone who accepts her extreme grotesque features, she becomes accepted by this person on her own terms and not those of patriarchy.

By the male lead leaving the symbolic world to embrace Dooneese’s abjection, his body is also viewed as abject. Specifically, when he takes Dooneese’s tiny hands and sucks on them, the male lead is defying the borders of his classic body by putting a disabled body part, deemed to be deficient, unclean, and ultimately grotesque, into his mouth. Thus through his embracement of abjection, the male lead’s body loses its fixed identity as “whole and proper” (Creed, 1993; Kristeva, 1982).

Overall, this interaction counters associated shame of defilement within the symbolic understanding of abjection. Specifically, Dooneese’s deviant body and actions transform shame in two central ways: first, the male leads’ repulsions of Dooneese typically signal that she should be ashamed of her grotesque appearance and actions, but this final male lead learns to appreciate her corporeal deviance and no longer shames her; second, by the male lead embracing Dooneese

and her abjection, he has also transformed the shame that he is supposed to feel about becoming abject. In the end, regardless if Dooneese is aware of her transgressive behaviors, her spectacle creates, counters, and transforms associated shame of a freak.

While it is important to note how both of these sketches provide empowering shifts in patriarchal representations by men embracing the abject, female disabled body, only two out of seventeen sketches featuring physically disabled women offer this type of subversion. Thus, while these two portrayals are subversive, *SNL* still largely represents other characters' reactions to women with disability(s) in negative and derogatory ways. In doing so, the sketches most often resolve the conflict of corporeal difference by the disabled women characters being ostracized and left isolated from others. Thus, the ableist position is still very prominent in these depictions of disabled women characters on *SNL*.

Representations of Disabled Women and Corporeal Deviance

In various ways, each of these four physically disabled women characters represents corporeal deviance. First, their physical disabilities position their bodies to be viewed by other characters as deviant and subsequently devalued; second, their actions, that are often deemed as grotesque based on their disability and/or their gender, further add to such devaluation. Although these physically disabled women characters are variously demeaned and subjugated through burlesque/negative grotesque framings, through the positive grotesque they still claim control over their identities, bodies, and experiences. Through these processes, each of these four characters variously embrace the embodiment of a defiling, unclean, improper body that is repulsive, often offensive, and may even signal terror (Kristeva, 1982; Russo, 1995).

In so doing, these characters use the transgressive potential of the grotesque, as Rowe defines it, to variously expose, recode, and reframe hegemonic authority over the disabled

woman's body. They shape their bodies and behaviors in ways they deem to be acceptable and natural, regardless of cultural norms and the scrutiny from other characters. For example, each of these characters variously expose how the beauty myth is heavily ingrained as a cultural norm and does not align with cultural understandings of a woman's disabled body. Then, each of these characters recode and reframe these cultural norms by offering counter-representations of subversion to highlight the beauty and unshaming aspects of corporeal difference. In doing so, these characters not only resist the patriarchal dominance placed on a woman's body but also variously utilize abjection to transform the disabled body into a positive grotesque embodiment that variously encourages a spectacle.

Furthermore, all four physically disabled women characters "lay claim to their own desire" (Rowe, 1995, p. 31). In resisting the beauty myth, they do not hid or conceal their disabled identities and are proud of what it represents. More specifically, each of these women characters holds agency in making choices with their voice, body, and sexuality and ultimately subverting how others define them as disabled women.

These findings also counter some research concerning the depictions of freaks. Unlike freak show "freaks," the modern "freak" women characters on Saturday Night Live do not remain idle and passive, even when normative characters ridicule them. (Garland Thomson, 1997a). These women characters own their actions and are not timid or afraid in the face of patriarchal dominance. While they do adamantly attempt to fit in with the others, these disabled women characters do not alter their behavior to become more passive, submissive, and feminine to become accepted by other characters. In doing so, these freak representations of a woman's physically disabled body symbolizes what Garland Thomson (1997a) describes as "a potential for individual freedom denied by cultural pressures toward standardization" (p. 68). In the face

of patriarchal dominance, they do not display their bodies in ways to conform to the cultural norms that promote this standardization. Characterized as freaks, their representations signal freedom and agency regarding their display of displeasing behaviors as physically disabled women.

Lastly, these provocative representations offer potential for counter-hegemony regarding narratives of physically disabled women. As disability texts, these depictions represent “narratives of resistance” instead of “narratives of overcoming” that typically comprise many narratives of disability (Garland Thomson, 1995). And regarding depictions of women’s resistance specifically, Peterson (1996) explains that such works can

Constitute what Helene Cixous calls ‘sexts’ – female-sexed texts that convert patriarchal fear of the feminine into female empowerment and force a confrontation with the illusion that underlies female otherness. They imply that this illusion, while reassuring some in their normality, also invests the other with a good deal of power that, if unleashed, could undermine the very foundations of culture. (p. 292)

I would also reiterate that normative culture positions a fear of the disabled body (Dolmage, 2014). In combining these marginalized identities, this analysis has demonstrated how patriarchal fear of the female disabled body specifically is widespread in these media depictions. However, the depictions on *SNL* offer resistance to this patriarchal fear by radically twisting the meanings of these negatively burlesque/grotesque framings of corporeal otherness into positive grotesque interpretations (Pelle, 2010). Overall, these representations’ themes of exposing and resisting dominant cultural norms regarding physical disability, women, and femininity signal subversive portrayals that are still seldom in the expansive medium of television.

Chapter 4

Depictions of Disabled Women Characters on *SNL*

They (disabled people) want to be able to imagine themselves in a world without feeling ashamed. (p. 69)

-Tobin Siebers (2008)

Throughout this study, I have demonstrated how the trope of disabled women as Other is constructed in SNL sketches. I have engaged with critical, feminist, and rhetorical scholarship to help support my overarching argument pertaining to how disabled women characters transgress the beauty myth and, in doing so, resist ableist constructions of the body. Throughout this final chapter, I provide a summary of my findings and place particular attention on how the rhetorical frames helped shape my analysis of these portrayals, how sketch comedy should be valued by critics for its popular representations of disability, why rhetoric(s) of the body matter as it relates to my study, and lastly, I further weigh the subversive potential of disabled persons in culture. First, I will summarize how disabled women characters resist the cultural norms pertaining to the beauty myth specifically.

Summary of Findings

Representations of Disabled Women and the Beauty Myth

This study has found depictions of disabled women characters on *SNL* to represent two intertwined meanings: one representing ideological constructions of disability and women, and the other portraying the subversions of cultural norms regarding disabled women specifically. The rhetorical frames have been vital these understandings, with the burlesque/negative grotesque framework highlighting the ideological constructions of disability and women, and the burlesque/positive grotesque emphasizing the transgressions of disabled women. In doing so, I have been able to not only provide an analysis that accounts for both the ways in which cultural

norms of the body, ability, and gender are further reiterated and reinforced in these texts but also how bodies transgress normative thought.

More specifically, the burlesque/negative grotesque perspective highlights the ways in which women are ridiculed and shamed for actions and/or appearances that differ from cultural standards based on their disabled bodies and/or mental distress. Viewed as exhibiting corporeal deviance, these women are variously shunned from society for their perceived differences. Not only are disabled women's bodies usually shunned from all activity, but their voices are also variously ignored or silenced. From this perspective, their bodies and experiences hold no cultural value or relevance. Furthermore, in the burlesque/negative grotesque framing, each disabled woman character is juxtaposed next to women adhering to the notion of the proper and fixed classic body. These other women have more feminine bodies and delicate mannerisms that more closely align with the cultural norms of the female body. While exhibiting these culturally normative features of femininity the other women characters often directly or indirectly demean the disabled woman character for her perceived differences providing a clear contrast and underpinning this notion of the disabled woman character as Other.

Likewise, in competition and/or romantic sketches featuring a male lead character, he always directly ridicules the body and behaviors of the physically disabled woman character. For the most part (other than in two of the sketches analyzed in this study), the male lead is always extremely repulsed by the physically disabled woman's body, adamantly avoiding her and trying to ostracize her from the scene. Overall, the burlesque/negative grotesque frameworks highlight how representations on *SNL* support the stereotypical constructions of disabled women as unattractive, incapable, incoherent, incompetent, helpless, weak, and ultimately deviant. In addition, my analysis adds to these characterizations finding that disabled women characters are

most often the outcast and further shunned from communicating with others. Their voices and bodies largely remained unsanctioned in the public sphere.

Conversely, through the burlesque/positive grotesque, my analysis has also shown how the disabled women characters' deemed deviancy can be used as a catalyst for the subversion of cultural norms of the body, ability, and gender. Their deviancy is demonstrated through their deemed grotesque bodies – specifically their appearances and behaviors. Even though other characters try to demean them, these physically disabled women characters never feel associated shamed for their deformed physical features or how their bodies might naturally move or dance differently than the other able-bodied persons. Either done so inadvertently or purposely, these women characters subjectively define their disabled bodies by creating a spectacle and behaving in ways that seem natural to them, but are judged to be grotesque and offensive by others. Their bodies disrupt the borders and boundaries of the classic body. Because some of these character's bodies are physically deformed, they do not represent the wholeness and completeness of the classic body. Likewise, neither the physically deformed nor physically disabled women characters hide their bodies or feel shame once others demean them. Rather, these women characters continue to subvert cultural norms and offend others by further displaying their grotesque characteristics.

Through such subversion, these physically disabled characters often demonstrate transformative shame. They take the shame that other characters place on them/their bodies and radically twist their meanings from negative grotesque interpretations into subversive representations of the abject. Through such processes, these women characters demonstrate that their deformed or disabled bodies are imbedded in incompleteness that cannot be confined to

fixed characterizations of the classic body. Likewise, their voices also resist confinement and are used to further emphasize the grotesque aspects of their sexuality and corporeal differences.

Transformative shame is also a component of two narratives featuring men that embrace the disabled woman character's corporeal deviance. In these sketches, a male lead character leaves the confines of the classic body and not only embraces the woman character's abjection, but also embodies it too. Furthermore, these sketches reiterate the subversive potential of physically disabled women to not only transform their own body shame, but to also persuade others to value bodies outside of normative thought regarding the categories of ability and gender.

Lastly, regarding depictions of physically disabled women, these characters do not become angry or sad when they are shunned from the scene. Instead, these women characters continue to provide a spectacle, regardless if anyone is watching. Overall, they do not focus on being the outcast; rather, these physically disabled women characters go about enacting grotesqueness and do not feel shame for their corporeal differences.

Powerful Role of Sketch Comedy

As the chapters of my study have addressed, sketch comedy in particular provides a platform for representations of disability that may differ from other medium formats. For example, as Garland-Thomson (1997a) and Quayson (2007) have both found, tensions regarding disability are not typically addressed between non-disabled and disabled characters in a popular culture text. The stereotype of disabled person as Other is still prevalent, but the characters do not address this othering or the nervousness that is associated with this positioning of persons with disability. However, the dynamics in sketches on *SNL* do allow for expressions of these tensions between both disabled and non-disabled characters. In these sketches, the non-disabled

persons convey the normate constructions of fear and repulsion of disabled women characters by ridiculing and shaming them.

Contrastingly, my analysis has also revealed the ways in which the normate position is not upheld by disabled women characters. For these disabled characters, they take the fear or repulsion that has been communicated to them in a scene and they address this tension by enacting behaviors that go against normative constructions of their bodies, abilities, and gender. Hence, my study has revealed how the seemingly short-circuited trope of disabled woman as Other actually represents complex representations of disability in this medium sub-genre. Although *SNL* portrays many ideologies of ability and gender for purposes of comic relief, this medium sub-genre of sketch comedy actually provides representations of corporeal otherness that transform these normate constructions and assumptions. By the end of the sketch, disabled women characters either purposely or inadvertently demonstrate that their construction as Other will not allow for further shaming of their bodies. Regardless of normate culture, they own their bodies, behaviors, and desires. Thus, as a popular culture artifact, *SNL* fully utilizes the format of sketch comedy to portray disability in complex ways. The format of sketch comedy offers critics a fruitful medium for further exploring the narrative prosthesis of disability through other depictions, such as an analysis of disabled men on *SNL* or disabled characters on other sketch comedy programs.

Rhetoric(s) of the Body

The third crucial area pertaining to this study that's value I want to reiterate is the rhetorical aspects of the female disabled body. As my study has argued, rhetoric plays an integral role in both shaping and also understanding the cultural meanings of the female disabled body. Rhetoric shapes normate constructions of ability and also reiterates cultural norms based on

gender. As a methodological tool, utilizing an application of rhetorical frames has allowed me to uncover the multiple layers of cultural meanings of the body and ability as depicted in popular culture.

As was demonstrated through the application of the frames, the body holds rhetorical power to shape, shift, and transform the notions of ability, beauty, heterosexual appeal, and the grotesque. These disabled women characters' bodies exhibit the subversive rhetorical potential to unsettle social hierarchies by altering or denying the cultural meanings of these identity categories. The rhetorical dynamics of each sketch allows for critics to look for rhetorics of normalcy, as Dolmage (2014) labels it, by specifically deconstructing the female disabled body for such acts of transgressions.

In closing, studying the rhetoric(s) of the body offers many rhetorical possibilities of meanings. As rhetorical critics, we must remember that the body functions as a rhetorical product or experiment (Dolmage, 2014). Through my analysis, I have found that sketches portraying female disabled bodies function both as a rhetorical product and an ongoing experiment. The finished sketches are rhetorical products that reiterate cultural meanings of the body. They are also a part of an ongoing experiment to situate transgressive or ideological representations of the body, and to see how audiences will react to these representations. As briefly discussed in chapter one, the *SNL* audience at large holds power in protesting and being the reason for shifts towards equality in marginalized representations of identity categories.

Subjectivity and Subversions in Depictions of Disabled Women in Popular Culture

I will conclude this chapter by discussing one of the utmost important findings of this analysis that accounts for the center of my argument: the subjective elements of the subversions of disabled women characters. As the above sections of this summary have reiterated, sketch

comedy rhetorically situates the body as symbolizing possibilities for revisions of cultural meanings of ability and gender. In order to accomplish these subversive behaviors, disabled women characters either purposely or inadvertently step outside of the normative culture to enact subjectivity and reshape their ability and beauty. Although the initial layers of ideologies of ability might mask it, subjectivity is clearly demonstrated by disabled women characters throughout these sketches.

Because scholarship has so often found ideological representations of disabled persons, especially disabled women, as Other in negative and stereotypical ways, portrayals of subversion offer the chance for disabled women characters to act as subjects to define their bodies and lived experiences on their own terms. In the face of ableist representations, the empowering aspects of subversive portrayals must be recognized, especially in popular culture formats wherein texts so often portray stereotypes.

However, the subversive potential of real disabled persons to resituate cultural meanings is not completely agreed upon by feminist disability scholars. For example, both Erevelles (2001) and Shildrick (2009) argue that acts of subversion by real disabled persons in the real world actually negatively impact them. As Erevelles summarizes, poststructuralist reconceptualizations of the body as signaling disruptions of power seem to, at first, create many possibilities for transgressions of the body. However, as Erevelles warns, critics must employ a “historical material analysis of disability” that accounts for “the adverse effects of the current global economic crisis” that has “not only disabled people but other marginal groups marked by race, class, gender, and sexuality” (Erevelles, p. 93). As Erevelles further explains, different “social and economic transformations that globalization has generated” has had “adverse effects on the lives of disabled people... globally” (p. 93). Likewise, Shildrick argues that laws and

cultural norms regarding notions of citizenship and justice actually restrict disabled persons from experiencing subjectivity in defining their lived experiences and demands for equity. Therefore, these scholars have argued that discourse has had a distinctly negative impact on the lives of real disabled persons struggling to achieve equity and to subjectively define their own identities.

Although these scholars make insightful arguments regarding subjectivity and subversion in other discourses, I argue that in a landscape of popular representations of disability that largely portray it through objectivity, the subjective possibilities of depictions of disabled women create positivity and agency. Though some of the portrayals may still seem ideological concerning the extremeness of their grotesque qualities and overt sexualities, it is empowering to view the disabled woman character *herself* (re)situating her identities, especially within a discourse that perpetuates normativity.

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