

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# “Thrilla in Manila”: Troubling Theatricality and Uneasy Spectator Affects Surrounding the Ringside Bar Midget Boxing and Wrestling

Neslie Carol Tan  
University of Melbourne, Australia  
nesliet@student.unimelb.edu.au

This paper illustrates how performance and affect inform disability politics in the case of Filipino Little People wrestlers and boxers at the Ringside Bar along a red-light district in Makati City, Philippines. The archive of the study focuses on the reception of its primarily foreign visitors as manifested online, including the bar’s unofficial Facebook account, review-based websites, and select travel and expatriate blogs/vlogs where reviews of these attractions most actively circulate. First, I map out the troubling theatricality of midget wrestling and boxing, identifying their cast, choreographies, and designs, to reveal traces of freak show traditions. Second, I unpack the uneasy affects of the (activated) spectators generated by the performances. I argue that, amidst the façade of “intense crazy action” promoting these attractions, there are palpable cracks of apprehension that expose guilty tensions of complicity with disablist attitudes and, at the same time, reveal embarrassed resistance against a perceived tourist scam. The implications of these precarious performances and confused affects on disability politics, specifically on the already tenuous relationship between exploitation and agency among the Little People in the Philippines, are discussed.

**Keywords:** midget wrestling and boxing, Little People, freak show, confused affects, activated spectators

## Introduction

On February 28, 1904, *The Washington Post* announced the arrival of “two Filipino midgets” on American soil: 31-year-old Martina with the height of 2’3” (69 cm) and 20-year-old Juan de la Cruz with the height of 2’5” (74 cm).<sup>1</sup> The siblings were brought to St. Louis, Missouri, to showcase how “pygmy Filipinos will be the most interesting anthropological types among all the strange island tribes in the great Philippine display at the World’s Fair” (5). A century later, the social and occupational choices of Little People (LP) in the Philippines seem to not have changed much as they thrive still on fringe entertainment forms.<sup>2</sup>

Glorian “Toinkee” Tomen, a 3’10” emerging leader of the Big Dreams for Little People–Philippines (BDLPP), explains that height is a key barrier for LP from getting regular employment (Lorenzo 19).<sup>3</sup> Lacking decent work alternatives, the entertainment industry becomes the easiest option for the LP. Social historian David Gerber (50) contends that this industry has remained prominent in the LP’s imagination as the quickest way to financial success and social acceptance.

One controversial career option among Filipino LPs is to work at the Ringside Bar along a red-light district in Makati City. This bar is notorious for its “midget boxing and (oil) wrestling” attractions that have a “quirky” appeal to some curious locals but cater mostly to tourists and expats.<sup>4</sup> They have also been gaining significant traction online in the past decade converging around tourism sites and expatriate blogs where they are touted as one of the less conventional ways of experiencing “intense crazy action” in Manila.<sup>5</sup>

The paper will thus focus on these internet-based media to illustrate how performance and affect inform disability politics in the case of LP wrestlers and boxers at the Ringside Bar. First, I will map out the troubling theatricality of midget wrestling and boxing, identifying their cast, choreographies, and designs to reveal traces of freak show traditions. Second, I will unpack the uneasy affects of the (activated) spectators generated by the performances. The implications of these precarious performances and confused affects on the disability politics of local LP—specifically on how these simultaneously animate bodies, sustain optimism, and defer politics—will be discussed.

## Theoretical Guideposts

Performance can be both a generative and disruptive site to examine disability. A basic understanding in a number of critical works that have explored the intersections of performance studies and disability studies is the strong sense of theatricality of disability (Sandahl and Auslander 5). Disability is always already a performance, whether onstage or offstage. Petra Kupperts (137) cites illustrative practices, ranging from the execution of everyday routines and interactions with people to the improvised movements and fixed choreographies in creative arts contexts, that disabled people perform—consciously or unconsciously following scripts comprehensible to the public. Bree Hadley (182) actually calls the disabled person an “unconscious-become-conscious performer” because the gaze upon him/her is palpable and the effect, according to Sandahl and Auslander (2), is inevitably some form of “commotion.”

The performance of disability is more acute for those with visible difference such as people with dwarfism. They invariably draw stares in public spaces since their anatomical distinction “intrudes on our routine visual landscape” (Thomson, *Staring* 20). They are “unfamiliar as flesh” but “too familiar as narrative” due to histories of cultural conceptions that have enfreaked their short-statured bodies in tropes of mythology and comedy (167). Adelson (pars. 6–17) mapped out a useful overview of the cultural history of dwarfs: they were highly prized as royal pets, priests, healers, or court jesters that may be gifted or lent to friends for amusement from the ancient courts to the eighteenth century. The decline of courts after this period pushed the visibility of dwarfs to taverns, fairs, and sideshows together with other “freaks” with unusual physiology.

Many performance and disability studies scholars have explored specifically the freak show era in the long and continuing history of dwarfs as entertainers. Freak shows have been established as early as the sixteenth century in England, but during those times, people with deformities and mental disabilities were displayed at random in village fairs or the countryside. It only gained a more formal commercialized and theatrical setup when it spread in the US in 1840s as a response to the growing demand for mass entertainment due to increased economic growth and urbanization (Gerber 43). P. T. Barnum played a major

role in this golden era of freak shows, ushering in a great assortment of "human curiosities" until its decline in the 1950s with the growing concern for minority rights, the medicalization of "abnormalities," and the proliferation of new forms of amusement (television and movies) (Adelson par. 18).

A consensus among scholars is that freaks are not inherent in any one person or community; rather, it is a social construction that is contingent on society's continually changing notions of normalcy and anxieties about deviancy (Adelson; Bogdan, *Freak Show*; Chemers; Thomson, *Freakery*). Bogdan insists that "freak" is "a frame of mind, a set of practices... the enactment of a tradition, the performance of a stylized presentation" (*Freak Show* 3). The freak identity is manufactured through theatrical techniques, which include costumes, set designs, choreographies, and rhetoric (Chemers 17). The dwarf performers in particular were enfreaked through different modes of presentation: Bogdan ("The Social Construction" 32) noted that well-proportioned hypopituitary dwarfs were shown using the aggrandized status mode, where they were exhibited as superior to the audience. They were given aristocratic titles, were adorned with lavish accessories, and were made to present usual show business performances instead of banal activities. Charles Stratton, or more popularly known as General Tom Thumb, is a key example of a well-loved dwarf paraded in all grandeur. However, the disproportionate achondroplastic dwarfs were displayed using the exotic mode of presentation, which highlighted their physical aberration and relied on creating mystery around the exhibit. Of course, the humor mode, executed through exaggeration and mockery, was present and was incorporated in these two dominant modes of presentation.

Whichever mode of presentation, the performances of dwarfs in freak shows generated particular clusters of affects. There were titillation and excitement and, at the same time, a sense of curiosity—"educational" for Hadley (4), but bordering on "prurient interest" for Thomson (*Staring* 186). Grosz (65) explains that the simultaneous fascination and horror evoked was drawn from witnessing our "mirror-images" that have somehow gone awry. Such affects typically elicited by the performances, or mere display, of dwarfs will be closely examined in this paper since, as noted by Cheyne, disability performances are usually charged with intense affects.

For the purpose of this paper, I take heed of Sara Ahmed's (*The Cultural Politics of Emotions* 194) assertion that affects are performative: they generate objects and repeat past associations in their iterative loops. In her work demonstrating how emotions circulate between signs and bodies, she proposed the concept of "affective economies" whereby "emotions *do things*, and they align individuals and communities—or bodily space with social space—through the very intensity of their attachments" ("Affective Economies" 119). As seen in their cultural history, the figure of the dwarf has long been stuck with the figure of the freak in their simultaneous summoning of fascination and horror in courts, circuses, or freak shows. The *Washington Post* article featuring Martina and Juan in the introduction also reported them as "freaks" even within their local community in the Philippines (5).

Even after their decline in the latter half of the twentieth century, dwarfs continue to be mired in demeaning low-bar entertainment forms that feature them as freaks. Adelson (par. 28) enumerates some of the activities that are "echoes of the past":

...being "tossed" in a bar, playing stereotypically negative roles in mainstream films, leaping about in bizarre costumes at half time in football games, acting as mascots, providing "atmosphere" in music videos, participating in reality TV, or appearing in pornographic films or at bachelor parties.

Pritchard (3) adds to this list the formation of theme parks such as China's "Kingdom of Little People," which is reminiscent of the late nineteenth- to twentieth-century "Midget Cities" across some parts of America and Europe.

This continued enfreakment of LP is reinforced even in our own local media, which has a history of showcasing LP characters as comic relief. Some of the notable ones through the years are Ernesto "Weng Weng" de la Cruz, famous for his James Bond parody *For Y'ur Height Only* (1981); Noel "Ungga" Ayala, who appeared in *Starzan III: The Jungle Triangle* (1990); and Romy "Dagul" Pastrana, who blends well among child actors in the ongoing kiddie gag show *Goin' Bulilit* (2005), to name a few (Almo). Such debilitating representations structure the cultural imaginary about and prime emotions towards LP, perpetuating the same affects of amusement or ridicule

for short-statured people and maintaining their strong link to humor, whether good-natured or malicious.

But such affects toward LP performers in these contemporary forms of freak entertainment are complicated by development of a more “cultured” society where people are taught to be more tolerant of disabled people and not laugh at those who are physically different (Hadley 5). Shakespeare (“Joking a Part” 48) observes a “tension” whereby normate-spectators are torn between “open amusement at the predicament of the physically different, and a civilizing process which would banish such voyeurism and prejudice.” This mix of uneasy affects make it an interesting lens through which contemporary contentious performances involving dwarfs may be explored.

Moreover, turning to affects may also facilitate deeper understanding of the oft-debated exploitation-versus-empowerment issue in discussions about dwarfs involved fringe forms of entertainment (Adelson; Bogdan, *Freak Show*; Chemers; Gerber). Cheyne contends that affects have radical and transformative potentials that fit in well with disability activism aimed at challenging ableism and mobilizing people into concrete actions. On the flip side, sociologist Deborah Gould (26) warns that affects may also be “one of the most important sources of political *inaction*.” Affects can create and deepen attachments to certain norms of living, affiliations with particular regimes of leadership, or investments in specific comfortable social structures and familiar ideologies, thus blocking any stirrings of change that can spur people to action. Such intensity of attachments was the impetus of Lauren Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism*, where she tracked the affective dramas of adjustments during the post-1980s fraying of American fantasies of “the good life.” The very same affective dramas and good-life fantasies may be applicable in the current case of the Ringside Bar LP performers engaging in controversial yet commercially profitable work.

Hence, in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Ahmed (12) urges us to pay close attention to the circulations and resonances of affects. One way to “feel our way” is by teasing out the “emotionality of texts” through close readings of public materials. She focuses on how texts label or perform various emotions as these reveal the different orientations towards the objects constructed (14). In their edited work *Affective Methodologies*, Knudsen and Stage classify this affective research

methodology under “new textualities” whereby one studies “how a sample of texts, through their representation, ‘stick’ or ‘fixate’ certain negative/positive affects to certain subjects or objects” (18). This classification also includes analyzing body-text-assemblages where the recordings of laypeople in the process of witnessing events reveal their own affective investments through their camera angles, voice modulations and vibrations, and disruptions such as black screens and shaky footages (19). Furthermore, this affective strategy extends to communicative spaces, such as intertextual relations between primary audiovisual texts (such as content uploaded on video-sharing website YouTube) and tertiary texts (viewers’ comments), which may be characterized by “ruptures and redundancy” that could index the presence of affective entanglements (19). This combination of “new textualities” is a useful way of tracking affects in an archive covering audience reception of the Ringside Bar LP boxing and wrestling as manifested in the digital sphere.

## Methodology

A general google search of “midget boxing and wrestling at the Ringside Bar” produced several pages of expatriate and travel blogs, review-based websites, and the bar’s unofficial Facebook page. After going through the various types of websites, I chose ten sites from a range of foreign and local contributors in the past decade that I found illustrative of the dominant discourses and affects that abound the LP performances at the bar (see complete list in the “archive” section of the works cited list).<sup>6</sup> The writeups, photographs, and video posts from these sites serve as new textualities that potently reveal the circulating affects around the performance of the LP. By extension, the ensuing comments from other viewers—considered the secondary audiences of the Ringside Bar performances—are also included in the complex new textualities analyzed. I selectively retrieved quotes and scenes from this curated archive to substantiate and advance my arguments in this paper. Admittedly, these materials present only a partial look at the LP performances as they do not include any ethnographic observations or interviews with the performers. Still, this angle merits a close study since it arguably has the farthest reach as they circulate online and disseminate more widely their representations and



discourses about the Ringside Bar midget boxing and wrestling performances.

The archive exemplifies what Henry Jenkins (3) calls the "convergence culture," which is fitting in today's global tourism industry where consumers actively produce, annotate, and edit content about their travel experiences, which consequently structure how their audiences will explore places and engage with people in the future. As will be discussed later, the Ringside Bar performances are packaged as one of Manila's "quirky" tourist destinations by these online reviews and personal travel blogs. These sites thus constitute the most relevant "digital public" that concerns the performances of LP. This paper will argue that the circulating discourses in these sites are steeped in conflicting affects that inform attitudes towards the particular disability group and contribute to the LP's continued orientation towards fringe entertainment employment.

As in any research, it is important to be self-reflexive about one's own positionality especially in such a sensitive field as disability studies (Kruse 185; Pritchard 7). I am studying this performance as an average-height researcher quite new to the field. I understand what Robert Kruse (185) has pointed out—that nondisabled researchers who may have limited experience being part of a social minority confront challenges of presenting a proper, ethical, and accurate representation of a particular disability group and a nuanced treatment of their disability issues. As such, I acknowledge that my choice of a largely spectator perspective in the analysis of the case of the LP performances at the Ringside Bar runs the risk of presenting an incomplete picture of Filipino LP as well as echoing some debilitating depictions of LP. However, I find this a necessary initial step in the inquiry on the status of LP in Manila before I proceed to further ethnographic investigation with the actual performers. This archive from spectators who have witnessed the performances firsthand is important because their online posts can influence other prospective audiences. The possible dis/continued patronage of the performances in turn may affect work options of LP performers. This study is part of a bigger research project exploring the clusters of affects that circulate within/around performances in different cultural locations of disability in the Philippines.

### **Freak Show Flashback: Troubling Theatricality of Midget Wrestling and Boxing**

*"It was crazy. It was sick. It was lit."*  
—Erik (Eriksploration)

Semiotician and wrestling fan Roland Barthes (13) once described wrestling as a "spectacle of excess" akin to the "grandiloquence" of ancient theatres. But one review of the Ringside Bar performances warned, "the whole thing reeks of morbid curiosity. It's like watching a train wreck happen before your eyes."<sup>7</sup> This train wreck metaphor exposes the complex mix of anticipation and dread at witnessing the performance. Somehow, even prior to seeing the attraction, people already intuitively know what to expect, just like what Ahmed ("Affective Economies" 120) would refer to as an unconscious idea or repressed feeling that stirs up a morbid sense of horror nonetheless. Emotions can move *sideways*, sticking or adhering figures, ideas, and values together; they can likewise move *backwards*, demonstrating the historicity of emotions and the objects or ideas onto which people have learned to attach them (120). The "train wreck" metaphor illustrates both these sideways and backwards movements of affect: The visceral affects of simultaneous fascination and disgust summoned by the metaphor implicitly bridges the figure of the LP to that of the "freak" and exposes the history behind these stuck figures.

The notion of the LP as a freak has long been ingrained in the imagination of people, across different cultures. But, as discussed earlier, their freakery is socially constructed through histories of carefully choreographed performances (Bogdan, *Freak Show*; Chemers). This section will thus explore more closely the theatricality in the bouts at the Ringside Bar that are troubling in their semblance to a modern freak show. As sociologist Laura Backstrom (683–684) claims, where "anomalous bodies" such as the LP wrestler are used as hooks to lure the voyeuristic public, then it seems the legacy of the freak show remains alive.

The performances studied here, while not unique to the Philippines, contrast starkly from "professional" midget wrestling troupes in the West. In fact, during its heyday around the 1950s and 60s, Western midget wrestling produced icons with well-developed characterizations such as Canadian Marcel Gauthier (Sky Low Low), Quebec-born Lionel Giroux (Little

Beaver), and British Eric Tovey (Lord Littlebrook)—all of whom, according to Olympic historian John Grasso (8), performed athletic stunts with artistic commitment.<sup>8</sup>

Meanwhile, the Ringside Bar LP wrestlers seem to lean more toward freakish entertainment as they are devoid of distinguishing characterizations or narratives. Sporting uniform bulky blue and red bottoms, they invite comments asking if the nappy company, Pampers, is a major sponsor of the sport.<sup>9</sup> Such comments illustrate the disablist infantilization to which LP are usually subjected (Gerber 51). Thomson (*Staring* 173) notes that the default understanding of most people is to regard LP as children and to treat them accordingly. Moreover, they are addressed collectively as “midget wrestlers/boxers”—or as shown in the end credits of an edited video uploaded by Phillips, they are called as “a gnome, a midget, a dwarf, an Ompah loompah.” This particular edited video amplified the frenzied, comical effect of the bout by setting the amateurish wriggling, slipping, and pushing of the LP wrestlers on fast motion to match the upbeat tune of Yakety Sax, the wacky theme song of the popular British comedy show *The Benny Hill Show*, known for its physically aggressive slapstick humor. The overall look of the performers sloppily pantomiming violence and haphazardly simulating aggression is that of “angry babys” [sic] wrestling: “Ass kicking is ever so much more entertaining when it comes in happy meal size. LOL.”<sup>10</sup>

The mode of presentation of the Ringside Bar LP wrestlers departs from Bogdan’s observations on the usual exotic or aggrandizing modes of presentation of LP in early twentieth-century American freak shows (“The Social Construction of Freaks” 32). Instead, the current performances appear to be more aligned with cultural and literary critic Sianne Ngai’s theorizing of the performative aesthetics of the “zany.” Unlike the lightheartedness of “goofy” or “silly,” the zany’s performance, even if still playful, accrues a desperate strung-out quality (185). The supposed “great spectacle of Suffering, Defeat, Retribution, or Justice” that Barthes (17) mythologized about average-sized French wrestlers is instead played out in a chaotic series of slippery “shoving” and “wiggling” attempts by the Ringside Bar LP wrestlers.<sup>11</sup> But even in its futility, there are hints of danger in the comic vigor of the zany. In fact, performance artist Kristina Wong, who refereed a match, worried about how to break the LP

boxers apart as she could “feel that maybe the punches are real” (Diaz par. 10). Moreover, attesting to the precarious flexibility of the zany (Ngai 182), the LP performers also assume versatile roles throughout the night: as hosts, wrestlers, boxers, and even dancers in between matches.

To further provoke “culture shock” (The Expat Angle), the performance changed the dynamics of the spectatorship. Earlier freak show conventions practiced what literary critic Susan Stewart (110) calls the “pornography of distance” where the object is “overwhelmingly conspicuous” while the audience and the mediators remain hidden to avoid any form of contamination. But for this current case, the Ringside Bar’s “greasy Filipino announcer” actively pursues guests to fight against the LP performers or referee a match (Gibson). This audience participation resembles the mechanics of another controversial “sport” in LP history: dwarf throwing or tossing. This entertainment form involves an average-sized person, typically inebriated, throwing a dwarf across a bar and onto a mattress (Adelson; Pritchard 5). Of course, the coveted participation comes with a price in the form of variable cash tips or drink treats.<sup>12</sup>

Once the nondisabled participant is inside the ring, they become what performance scholar Helena Grehan (2009) calls “activated spectators.” Their engagement with the LP performers, however improvised, somehow follows certain routines, such as the one featured by vlogger Erik from San Francisco (Eriksploration). After the “backstage” negotiations between the announcer and the nondisabled guest, the latter is invited inside the ring. A crucial element is alcohol—since a tipsy boxer/wrestler makes for a more amusing show. Interestingly, the LP boxers themselves are rarely shown drinking.<sup>13</sup> The required intoxication, coupled with other ludicrous conditions such as requiring Erik’s right hand to be tied to his back and Erik being asked to box kneeling down, is set not only to level the playing field between the average-height guest and the LP boxers but also to magnify the outrageousness of the spectacle, thus intensifying the affective charge surrounding it. The three-minute drunken bout, which unfolded to the adrenaline-pumping theme song of *Rocky III* and documented by two of Erik’s friends circling the ring using their handheld camera/phones, ended with a surprise six-LP tag team against Erik.

Such a zany spectacle, which typically leaves viewers with mixed emotions, gives a whole new twist

to the title "Thrilla in Manila." Anton Diaz, founder of popular lifestyle blog *Our Awesome Planet*, confessed, "...it was an assault to the senses and I wasn't sure how to react to the experience." But Erik only had this to say: "It was crazy. It was sick. It was lit."

These samples of confused affective responses from participants and audiences necessitate a deeper analysis of the affects circulating the theatricality inside the ring that is troubling in its modernizing of the freak show spectacle. Affects may facilitate understanding of the enduring comic regard for LP and their continued orientation toward the freak show type of entertainment as a cultural location of disability. As disability theorists Snyder and Mitchell (212) have emphasized, the cultural locations of disability "have evolve[d] externally to" the different disabled communities. It complements Ahmed's notion of "orientation," which "exposes how life gets directed in some ways rather than others, through the very requirement that we follow what is already given to us" (*Queer Phenomenology* 21). The lives of the LP in the Philippines have been oriented along particular paths by virtue of their physical difference, and many have been directed toward this specific cultural site, the Ringside Bar, for employment and for social recognition, if not acceptance. I argue in the next section that the circulating spectator affects expose and somehow contribute to this orientation.

### Cracks of Apprehension: Uneasy Affects Inside and Outside the Ring

*"It's not as glamorous as it sounds."*  
—Matt Gibson (xpatmatt)

There seems to be conflicting affects running throughout the experience of these performances that are variably contextualized as a quirky entertainment industry, an opportunity for charity, and a tourist scam. From the very start, many recognize that watching midget wrestling and boxing nowadays when people are expected to be more progressive is "not very PC" (Fielden) and such performances "would definitely be considered illegal if staged in a Western country" (Treloar). However, the urge to witness what has thus far resided only in the cultural imaginary is strong: "I know I wasn't supposed to, but...hey, ho, let's go!" Yelp reviewer Danyella admits.<sup>14</sup> Once inside, a night of outrageous stunts would typically elicit

amused cheers from spectators. But these affects are simultaneously undercut by simmering feelings that "something just doesn't sit right."<sup>15</sup> Such concurrent responses may be typical of disability encounters, which, according to disability theorist Ria Cheyne, are always affective encounters rife with potential awkwardness, misunderstandings, and prejudices.

But a crucial factor adding to the uneasy affects in this case is the fact that the affective economies of the show are not lost on its primarily foreign market. The Ringside Bar performances are modern-day freak show *tourist* attractions that capitalize on the exhibition of the dwarf body. Even while absent from official tourism marketing, these have been included in the unofficial list of "quirky things to do in Manila" (Travel Cake). The testimonies about these shows circulating in user-generated review sites are heavily implicated in the construction of "Otherness" that is typical of tourism discourses (Jamerson 119). In *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*, Dean MacCannell formulates this "Otherness" as unspoiled "authenticity" that modern tourists seek to counter their fractured everyday experiences. Dave Cooper (154), drawing on Said, extends this concept to the "the exotic, the strange, the dangerous"—which in this case are embodied by LP performers wrestling and boxing in a bar. Southeast Asian scholar Nicole CuUnjieng brashly frames this exotic tourist performance as the "selling of the marginalized" in her editorial piece for *The Manila Times*.

Acutely aware of this fact, the digital public swings between acknowledging that the spectacle "can get a little fucked up" and rationalizing that it "is all just in a day's work."<sup>16</sup> The Expat Angle further emphasizes the restricted alternatives available for LP in a developing country: "Manila is not the land of opportunity for everyone and while it is not the most pleasant way to make a living, it is still a living." Hence, despite feeling "quite embarrass[ed] to see the midgets earning their money by being a kind of joke," the bottom line is there is "no guilt" as many consider their patronage of the performance as "a way to support a group of people who would otherwise have trouble finding regular jobs."<sup>17</sup> This back-and-forth weighing of how viewers feel about the performances reveals an underlying tension of guilty complicity with a controversial industry propped by structural inequalities of a disablist system. Australian expatriate in the Philippines James Treloar only had this to say as a form of resolution to

this emotional block: "...if your conscience gets the better of you just leave a bigger tip..." This statement exposes a system akin to charity maintenance sustained by affects. The statements and acts of "generosity" quell whatever shame, embarrassment, or guilt is tied to patronizing this particular entertainment industry. Such affective resolutions may also contribute to the deferment of disability activism on the part of the LP whose optimism towards earning immediate financial gains are sustained, regardless of the precarity of their nightly bouts.

This uneasy mixture of amusement in witnessing/participating in a quirky entertainment and guilty rationalizations of providing charitable help to the "unfortunate" is also tinged with suspicious awareness of and embarrassed resistance to the larger context of the performance as a tourist hustle. The average-sized guests themselves also have to grapple with uncomfortable feelings of exploitation by the mechanics of the industry. Canadian blogger Matt Gibson sheds a more critical light on the midget boxing spectacle: "It's not as glamorous as it sounds." He even calls the participatory element a "scam," emphasizing how the refereeing participation is merely a bait for foreigners to pay more in exchange for a "fun" night. He focuses on the essential affective element in these attractions: shame. Local hustlers usually extend "overly friendly" services to the extent that tourists are guilted into paying for the hospitable services rendered.

Shaming in this case appeals to pity and is underscored in the announcer's affective ambush on guest referee Gibson right after a match: "Come on. They work hard. You buy them some drinks.... You don't think they work hard?" Gibson was put on the spot: "If I said no, I would basically be insulting the midgets to their faces and I would look like a cheapskate in front of everyone. This was the hustle." Shaming becomes an affective profit-making tool of the industry—not just of tourism per se but also of freak shows. Chemers (5) reminds us that freakery operates by "systematically and strategically nurtur[ing] discomfort in order to exploit it for profit." Ahmed (*The Cultural Politics* 107) adds shame can be wielded and experienced "as the affective cost of not following the scripts of normative existence." In this case, the norm is to give (in), while shame lies in *not* participating and becoming what Ahmed ("Happy Objects" 39) calls a "kill-joy." This "affect alien" is attributed as the source of bad feeling and the one who obstructs

the promise of happiness, which in this case pertains to both the affective (raucous festivities inside the bar) and the economic (potential financial gains) (30). Many tourists succumb to the social pressure within the ring; however, being an experienced traveler, Gibson refused to be guilted into spending 110 USD and exited the ring.

This incident exposes the desperate side of the show—a quality observed by blogger Sarah, who commented that the performances can feel a bit too jolly when tourists and massage girls alike "cheer on their favourite fighter and laugh like the world will end if they don't" (Travel Cake). Such sense of forced fun makes the spectacle "hard to watch,"<sup>18</sup> illustrating how the zany, which thrives on flagrant gaiety, "fails in its all-too-obvious effort" (Ngai 186).

Curiously, even during these times, the LP performers are somehow excused from any visitor hostility or cynicism but are instead regarded as honest and amiable hardworkers who display "good ol' decency" lacking in the industry in which they work. In fact, Gibson ended up treating the two LP boxers to a couple of drinks when they approached him after the match to shake his hand and "show that there were no hard feelings." The LP performers understand the dynamics and pressures of the performance as a tourist promotion. Some tourist-bloggers would even go as far as insisting that "the midgets don't feel exploited" (Diaz) and they "seemed to have fun, too."<sup>19</sup> Videos and photographs circulating in the digital sphere display the LP wrestlers happily executing stunts and tricks, and they show them cheerfully posing with guests in between or after their matches.

There seems to be a strong reinforcement of what Shakespeare et al. (20) have observed to be the prevailing cultural image of LP: "a happy, outgoing and entertaining person, usually male." That this image may just be a façade is never complicated nor probed more deeply by the digital public. Organizations employing LP usually insist on what Gerber (50) has noted as "a veneer of cooperation and cheerfulness" to help downplay negative aspects of the LP's actual experiences of social stigma and instead promote their acceptance and integration into society. In this case, the spectators' emphasis on the LP's positive image has affective logics: to possibly assuage any sense of guilty pleasure or discomfort and maintain the happiness of the predominantly tourist attraction.

However, such affective logics have consequences



on not only the LP performers but also other LP in the society. Thus, in the next section, I will discuss the implications of these precarious performances and confused affects on disability politics, specifically on the tenuous relationship between exploitation and agency among the LP.

### **Freaks on the Fringes: The Lot in Life of Little People in the Philippines?**

*"Mayweather vs Pacquiao, no no no, I want to know if Grumpy can floor Happy!!"*  
—Darrell Monaghan (2015)

LP are indeed a unique group within the larger, more diverse disability community as they complicate notions of exploitation and emancipation of disabled people. They are beset by what Tom Shakespeare, a sociologist with achondroplasia, calls the "comedy model of disability" (qtd. in Adelson par. 55)—a unique disposition since Dan Kennedy (213) pointed out other disabled groups "don't rent themselves out." Given that LP seem to have "skillfully maneuvered their way under the radar of political correctness" (Roberts), Gerber (49) critically asked, "How are we to evaluate the participation of dwarfs in such rituals of debasement?"

Gerber answered his own question by problematizing the illusion of choice and consent. Referring to the critique of consent theory by political scientist Don Herzog's *Happy Slaves* (1989), he emphasized the need to interrogate the unequal structures that frame the range of choices available to them. There may be the illusion of choice and uncoerced consent, yet the very limits imposed on the scope and quality of alternatives dispel the fantasy of agency. Or as Stewart (110) put it, "the contingencies of the economic system force the freak to sell himself or herself as a spectacle commodity."

Life for Filipino LP is indeed precarious. To begin with, there is no official accounting of their population (Hodal). This lack is in part a problem of clear definition of LP. Orejas (2017) reports that while there is a clear definition of LP in the US, which is any adult below 4'10" (147 cm), the Philippines has yet to stipulate a standard definition as Filipinos are generally relatively shorter, with an average height of 5'4" (163 cm) for males and 4'11" (150cm) for females (Lasco). This definition is crucial in facilitating government

assistance in health, education, and employment to the LP as Persons with Disabilities protected by the Philippine Magna Carta for Disabled Persons (Republic Act 7277).

Employment among LP is important, not only for financial stability but also "as a sign of adult status" that counters the stigma of immaturity and infantilization surrounding their short stature (Gerber 51). Unfortunately, disablism structural barriers hinder LP from decent work. There exists a minimum height requirement of 5'2 (157 cm) for most jobs, making an already tough job market due to high unemployment rate even more difficult for Filipino LP (McGeown).<sup>20</sup>

Johnson (2017) adds that within the context of a developing country such as the Philippines, "degrading" jobs that exploit one's physical looks but offer regular payment may easily be tempting "when the alternative is back-breaking labour in a rice paddy." Many LP from rural areas flock to the capital in search of work (Shadbolt), but options in Manila are mostly in irregular stints in lowbrow entertainment: as leprechauns, monsters, or other quirky extras in local shows (Hodal) or even as "human cannonballs" in some parties, which are basically dwarf-tossing events (McGeown). Tomen emphasizes that most of the LP in the Philippines belong to the marginalized sector, without proper education nor professional qualifications, and are thus compelled to turn to menial and low-paying jobs that increase their vulnerability to abuses (Lorenzo 19). Adelson raises the same point for LP in the US but also notes that if given increased employment options, many among the LP would grab the opportunity to pursue more "decent" jobs.<sup>21</sup> The bottom line is these freak show roles are not something one aspires to but, at most, something one may grudgingly fall back on when left with no other options (Gerber 49).

However, in the meantime while the campaign for better job opportunities for Filipino LP is still in its initial stages, wrestling and boxing at the Ringside Bar maintains its strong lure among local LP. For those who are part of it, it is not a stretch to claim that they commit affective bargains nightly, living out Berlant's concept of "cruel optimism." That is, their attachment to their own performance's promise of "good life" may prove to be costlier and may be the very cause of their slow attrition (27). There are indeed good nights that would earn them five thousand pesos (100 USD) (Teicher). But on a typical night, they earn only Php

250 (5 USD)—Php 50 is even deducted for laundry services of their outfits (Parry). Moreover, even amidst the wild elation inside the ring, there is also the constant potential of injury. Wrestler Doron admits that even if everything was just for show to give everyone a good laugh, “sometimes you could still get hurt and you were always slipping over in the oil” (Shadbolt). Strenuous activities such as boxing and (oil) wrestling, no matter how feigned, are especially dangerous since dwarfism is typically accompanied by secondary orthopedic and spinal impairments (Little People of America; Shakespeare et al. 23). Indeed, the LP wrestlers and boxers attest to Berlant’s (44) reflection that “people *are* worn out by the activity of life-building, *especially* the poor and the nonnormative.”

As such, Tomen advises her peers to be “more discerning with work, to choose one that’s not degrading” (Lorenzo 19). It echoes Adelson’s (par. 65) earlier clamor for the LP to develop a deeper understanding about “the legacy of their history as curiosities” and adopt a more reflexive attitude toward “how their personal and professional decisions enhance or diminish the lives of others like themselves.” In the larger context of disability politics, it may help for midget wrestlers and boxers to “suspend ordinary notions of repair and flourishing to ask whether the survival scenarios we attach to those affects weren’t the problem in the first place” (Berlant 49).

However, the onus of change lies not only on the LP themselves since their career decisions are strongly shaped by a larger disablist system that has presented them with restricted options from the very start and has packaged dwarfism as an exotic tourism attraction. Moreover, as argued in this paper, crucial to the maintenance of this disablist system are the affects surrounding controversial modern-day freak show performances of LP. Guided by Ahmed’s notion of performative affects, I have argued in this paper that spectator affects, however conflicted, in online platforms expose and amplify the hype around the performances, reinforcing misleading representations of LP and priming similar problematic affects among potential guests. The palpable mix of excitement, horror, shame, and guilt surrounding this contemporary performance recalls Victorian voyeuristic viewing practices that reiterate the idea of the dwarf body as a legitimate object for amusement. The enduring demand for the enfreakment of LP seems to sustain their optimism in the nightly animation of their anatomy

in less-than-ideal job markets while deferring LP advocacies for empowerment.

Of course, these readings, which are based largely on the digital discourses dominated by tourists, may neglect a critical component of the issue: the agency wielded by the LP performers themselves. In fact, this has been the crux of the controversial UK tour of Texas-based “Extreme Dwarffanators Wrestling” show last October 2018. Three venues cancelled their event after British charity organization the Restricted Growth Association rallied against it. But the wrestlers retaliated by citing discrimination and threatening to sue venues that cancelled their event (Rudgard). In the end, they were able to proceed with sold-out shows in Cardiff and Swansea and even have plans of returning in April 2019 (Dalling). Clearly, Adelson’s assertion of the kinds of entertainment that merit censure is not straightforward. Careful ethnographic observation of the performances and interviews with the LP themselves may shed critical light onto the performance dynamics and affects at play in this controversial performance.

Nevertheless, this paper has introduced a contemporary LP performance outside of the more well-documented Western settings, and it has provided important insights from its global digital public, demonstrating how their uneasy and contradictory affects index the instability and uncertainty of disability attitudes and how these in turn have implications in this particular contested cultural site of disability.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> I will use the term *midget*, even if understandably offensive, to refer to the particular form of entertainment analyzed and as it appears in original source texts of the study’s archive since this is reflective of the context of its use and the politics of its users.

<sup>2</sup> *Little People* or *LP* is the preferred term according to interview reports with representatives from the Little People of the Philippines (Lorenzo 19; Shadbolt 2011).

<sup>3</sup> BDLPP is a new organization for Filipino LP. It had its first general assembly in 2017 and has convened its members a few more times since (Parry). A personal interview with Tomen in 2018 revealed that the organization is currently still in the process of finalizing its registration with the Securities and Exchange Commission.

<sup>4</sup> Bogdan (*Freak Show*) and Thomson (*Extraordinary Bodies*) explain that the term *midget* was popularized by freak show manager and businessman P. T. Barnum in the

nineteenth century. He used this term to refer to people with restricted height who he promoted as celebrities and entertainers in his numerous freak exhibits and side shows.

<sup>5</sup> Comment by Chino J. in *Yelp* ("Recommended Reviews for Ringside Bar").

<sup>6</sup> I decided to focus on ten sites as this is a manageable number that offers an effective sweep of the assortment of affects and discourses about the LP performance without having to keep on repeating similar responses. Take note that two of the websites, *Yelp* and *Facebook*, are crowdsourced and generate a good number of data by themselves.

<sup>7</sup> Comment by Ron C. in *Yelp* ("Recommended Reviews for Ringside Bar").

<sup>8</sup> In the twenty-first century, midget wrestlers have shifted to independent wrestling troupes specializing in LP such as Extreme Midget Wrestling Federation, Half Pint Brawlers, and the Micro Wrestling Federation (Grasso 9). This shift was necessitated by the dwindling use of midget wrestlers by the World Wrestling Federation since the mid-1980s. Honswoggle (Dylan Postl), the remaining active wrestler then, was involved mostly outside the ring as an assistant. Meanwhile, the diminutive acrobatic El Torito's role was only as the mascot for the Los Matadores tag team.

<sup>9</sup> Comment by Hugo411 in the *Youtube* video, "Funny Midget Wrestling" (Phillips).

<sup>10</sup> Comments by CEgaming and miamiwildflower (Phillips).

<sup>11</sup> Comments by AnthoMan96 and Castle Bayern (Phillips).

<sup>12</sup> In his *Yelp* review, Nonito shared that they were invited to referee for Php 1,950 or around 37 USD. Meanwhile, Diaz reported having to buy 8–10 USD drink for each of the participants per round, while Gibson's computation was 9 USD per drink.

<sup>13</sup> One may critically argue that the "required drinking" may easily be part of the ruse of the whole profit-driven entertainment business as the risk of alcohol intoxication among LP performers is high, especially for their nightly consumption and relatively lighter body weight.

<sup>14</sup> Comment by Danyella P. in *Yelp* ("Recommended Reviews for Ringside Bar").

<sup>15</sup> Comment by Gabrielle A. ("Recommended Reviews for Ringside Bar").

<sup>16</sup> Comment by Nonito C. ("Recommended Reviews for Ringside Bar").

<sup>17</sup> Comments by Danyella P. and Natalie H. ("Recommended Reviews for Ringside Bar").

<sup>18</sup> Comment by Georgina G. ("Recommended Reviews for Ringside Bar").

<sup>19</sup> Comment by Danyella P. ("Recommended Reviews for Ringside Bar").

<sup>20</sup> For instance, aspiring police officers and security guards must be at least 5'2" (157 cm) for women and 5'4" (162 cm) for men (Lasco). Height requirements may be understandable for such professions, but there are still

instances such as the case of Ringside Bar wrestler/boxer Jonathan Cancela (4'8", 142 cm), who shared, "I'm a computer programmer by profession, but even if you have a good resumé and meet the job qualifications, [potential employers] say there's a height restriction, so they can't hire you" (Hodal).

<sup>21</sup> Adelson notes that unlike in the 1930s, when the few lucky employed dwarfs in the US were working in the entertainment industry, the employment landscape among American dwarfs based on the 2003 database of the Little People of America became far more diverse. Some were employed as physicians, engineers, actuaries, computer specialists, and other skilled professions. In fact, former circus clown Frank Theriault shares that Barnum and Bailey started having difficulties recruiting dwarf clowns because of the increased vocational opportunities possible for dwarfs in the twenty-first century.

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