

**Monsters, Freaks, and an *American Horror Story*: Life  
and Embodiment at the Borders of Normative  
Intelligibility**

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# Monsters, Freaks, and an *American Horror Story*: Life and Embodiment at the Borders of Normative Intelligibility

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*Abstract: The figure of the monster articulates a sociocultural regulatory taboo conditioning the life and bodily experiences of those social groups and populations that, unable to commensurate with widespread cultural conceptualizations and schemata, are invisible and unintelligible from normative standpoints. By approaching American Horror Story: Freak Show in terms of its narrative and the contextual mainstream consumption, this paper analyzes the violent means by which the monstrous taboo is policed, the role of neoliberalism in its current articulation, and the possibilities of resisting a transformation enabled by the monstrous figure and the bodies and experiences it codifies.*

*Keywords: abjection, monstrosity, queer/abject temporalities, sociocultural intelligibility, neoliberalism*

## **W**elcome to a monstrous show

In the 1990s, Susan Stryker brought to the fore several elements that are central to this paper. Rage, monstrosity, invisibility, and violence emerged in "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix" (1994) as constitutive experiences delimitating the discursive field of sociocultural intelligibility and regulating the material conditions of livability of trans populations.<sup>1</sup> However, Stryker was not the only one to denounce this situation of

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that I use trans here as an umbrella term encompassing the multiplicity of experiences, subjectivities, and embodiments that cannot be reduced to a single identity demarcation. Trans as a stand-alone term works as a political stance aimed at avoiding other, more restrictive terminology, as explained by Stephen Whittle in the "Foreword" to *The Transgender Studies Reader* (Stryker and Whittle xi). Hence, it describes the multiple

violence and invisibility. Around the same time, voices such as those of Sylvia Wynter and Judith Butler underscored the violence and oppression endured by those subject positions whose crossing of differential markers – such as race, gender, sexuality, employment, or class – resulted in sociocultural articulations unintelligible from dominant social positions.<sup>2</sup> But three decades later, and in spite of the prominent role that race, gender, and sexuality have gained on the popular and political stage – as exemplified by the current success of TV shows such as *RuPaul's Drag Race* (Charles) or *Pose* (Murphy, Falchuk, and Canals) – increasing conditions of violence and invisibility continue to affect those individuals and social groups on which the mainstream focus lands. The present moment of sociocultural monetization and commodification, along with strategies of window-dressing diversity, result in the further unintelligibility of those subject positions that cannot be put to work within neoliberal markets of production and consumption (Spade; Raha; Davis; Puar).

Stryker's text was in itself a call for resistance and transformation – a call to embrace the monstrosity projected upon those bodies and experiences that remain unintelligible from culturally normative standpoints. And this is precisely the core idea behind this paper: what I propose here is an analysis of the possibilities of resistance and the potentialities for transformation that, in the current process of neoliberal sociocultural reorganization, are enabled through and by those bodies and experiences that border the limits of normative intelligibility and existence. In the lines that follow I will turn to Stryker's figure of the monster, to those bodies and experiences that, unable to commensurate with widespread cultural conceptualizations and schemata, are culturally codified in monstrous representations. As I will argue, monstrous representations can be regarded as figures of taboo where sociocultural fears and anxieties delineate sociality's normative borders.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, these taboo representations also hold the

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experiences and positionings of a "set of gender rule-breakers" currently loosely gathered thereunder (Spade 21).

<sup>2</sup> "No Humans Involved: An Open Letter to My Colleagues" (Wynter) underscored the socially unintelligible situation of urban, jobless Black populations that the police and the members of the judicial system of Los Angeles referred to with the acronym NHI: No Humans Involved. Similarly, the analysis of Jennie Livingston's documentary film *Paris is Burning* (1991) in *Bodies That Matter* (Butler) revealed that the normative transgression embodied by Venus Xtravaganza, a poor, sex worker trans woman of color, resulted in her murder before the documentary was completed.

<sup>3</sup> It is interesting here to pay attention to Freud's definition of taboo in the second chapter in *Totem and Taboo*, where the term eludes clear delineation. The notion of taboo conveys mysterious characteristics related to the sacred, but also, and importantly, to the uncanny and the dangerous. Addressing taboo in this way highlights the connections between

potential to unsettle, even in a subtle way, those normative structures that render them monstrous. In order to account for the multiple connections between these bodily experiences and the cultural manifestations of taboo through which they are codified, I will address as a case study a particular season of a popular, mainstream TV series and horror anthology: *American Horror Story: Freak Show* (Murphy and Falchuk 2014).

In three steps, I will analyze how the narratives organized around the show's plot and characters emerge, extra-narratively, with regard to the connections between the figure of the monster and the current neoliberal rearticulation of sociocultural intelligibility. First, I will turn to the notion of abjection to address the central role it plays in the show's intra-narrative constitution of the monster as taboo. In the second step I will underscore the role of the current context of neoliberal assimilation and commodification in relation to the extra-narrative connections of the series' taboo and its monstrous figures of abjection. In the last step, I will address the intra- and extra-narrative queer and abject temporalities signified and enabled by these figures, as well as their potential for sociocultural transformation.

As will become evident, the theoretical perspectives and the case study that follows remain clearly framed within a Western context – particularly that of the United States. Nonetheless, the issues I address can be approached as tools for reflection on wider and varied power structures and systems of representation. By this I am not suggesting that these issues can be simply or unproblematically transposed or juxtaposed to broader, global social/cultural contexts and their vast specificities and variations. However, by approaching a mainstream cultural manifestation, I hint at an important way by which hegemonic discourses articulating intelligibility spread beyond their original social/cultural frame. Hence, *American Horror Story: Freak Show* can be said to be in a privileged position to enter the market of global consumption across geopolitical borders, subtly spreading hegemonic discourses as well as the means for their subversion and resistance.

### **May the freak show begin**

Set in the United States in the 1950s, *American Horror Story: Freak Show* depicts the story of one of the last freak shows, or monster circuses, that reached their heights of popularity in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. The fourth

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taboo, fear, and horror in the figure of the monster, as well as its potential for resistance and subversion.

season of a TV series and anthology that explores horror, *Freak Show's* narrative is organized in terms of what can be regarded as inner and outer circle. In other words, monstrosity is approached through a dichotomous articulation, where the figure of the monster – in this case projected onto those characters deemed freaks – takes center stage, while normative structures circumvallate it as peripheral and ex-centric. This dichotomous arrangement produces a series of discursive transferences and shifts in horror and monstrosity, as the element of horror expands across the inner and outer circle. As the story moves forward, horror and monstrosity seem to multiply, appearing and taking different forms across both the context of the monster circus and the normative realm that circumvallates it.

The line dividing freaks and normative citizens – a line that, at first sight, seems to be drawn mainly based on physical characteristics – is continually blurred; those members of the inner circle, the freak show, who pass as normatively bodied are ultimately linked to monstrosity through (sexual) bodily secrets: Elsa Mars, the freak show's owner played by Jessica Lange, hides that her legs were amputated during a sex-torture film in Nazi Germany, while Stanly, a con artist played by Denis O'Hare, conceals the fact that he possesses abnormally large genitals. Hence, at first sight, monstrosity and normativity seem condensed in the series into a metaphor of the idealized body, that social intelligibility is sanctioned by the materialization and maintenance of an ideal physical body. Nevertheless, as soon as the story unfolds, this body metaphor takes on a secondary role as a mere frame structure for the series while issues of visibility, intelligibility, and monstrosity are transferred into elements such as normative/non-normative kinship systems blurring its regulatory borders. In this sense, the circus itself emerges as a kinship structure for those who are unintelligible according to normative standpoints.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, at the core of this season's plot there is a drive for survival and social intelligibility that is repeated, with different hues, in each of its subplots: Elsa struggles in search of success and fame; the members of the freak show strive to be respected and survive in a violent society where they find no space; and the sinister figure of Stanly infiltrates the circus in an attempt to financially survive by murdering the freaks and selling their bodies to a museum.

In this regard, Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytic approach to the notion of abjection – a notion deeply connected to fear and horror – provides a critical

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<sup>4</sup> In an interesting reflection on the notion of freak in relation to both the freakshows of the early twentieth century and social and power structures in the late twentieth century, Eli Clare (81-118) addresses the complex relationship between exploitation, ableism, and racism, as well as the strategies of survival on the part of those constrained by the mentioned differential markers.

framework to understand how the transference of monstrosity I mentioned above takes place with regard to intelligibility and the regulation of the normative borders – that is, in relation to the limits of normative sociality and culture. In her approach to horror, Julia Kristeva points to abjection as a central, constitutive element in identity and subject formation through its interaction with and disruption of the subject-object dyad. The abject occupies an intermediary position in subject constitution, a position of ejection of the primal, abject object: the ab-ject (Kristeva 12-15). In other words, the ab-ject is psychologically relevant because it is ejected in the moment of subject constitution – in the moment when subject and object become differentiated and the ego emerges. However, this object ejection constituting the regulatory norms of the symbolic order – and also of the normative realm – does not entail the erasure of abjection. The abject remains in a constitutive position, evasively appearing on certain occasions, and threatening the normative order from within. This way, the abject functions as a horror that has to be policed, excluded, purified (Kristeva 65). Hence, the abject, the jettisoned object, “by means of a system of ritual exclusion [be it through violence or any other means] ... becomes *scription* – an inscription of limits” (Kristeva 73; italics in original) that demarcates the realm of normative intelligibility. In *Freak Show*, abjection seems to be paired with the figure of the monster/freak. Yet, an important characteristic of the abject object is that it is unconscious and unintelligible; it is that which, though central to the process of subject formation, has never made it to the light of the symbolic, and, by extension, to systemic sociality.<sup>5</sup>

Early in *Freak Show*'s narrative, the plot focuses on the members of the freak show and displays the brutal rejection exerted on them from the outer circle, thus transferring horror and monstrosity to the normative outer-circle characters who pose and enact the threat of violence and death. The series consciously reverses the element of monstrosity by positing the members of the freak show as the main focal point of the narrative, with their individual stories being the most developed. As the narrative develops, the members of the freak show become fully intelligible as oppressed characters struggling for survival, while the source of horror is evasively located in the outer circle. Exemplary of this is the violent murder of Meep, a character played by Benjamin Woolf, which is orchestrated by the police department as a means to intimidate and threaten the members of the freak show (Ep.2). But, bearing this transference and displacement of monstrosity in mind, how,

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<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, Vincent Bourseul's engagement with the notion of abjection with regard to the symbolic, social articulation, and other psychoanalytic notions, such as the uncanny, with regard to repression and foreclosure in “The ‘Uncanny’ and Queer Experience” (2010).

then, would the abject figure of the monster work as a means of sociocultural regulation within the narrative?

Monstrous abjection is constituted in the narrative as an all-pervasive taboo articulating the plot from the first to the last episode. The source of the taboo is neither located in an individual character nor limited to a single location; instead, it arises from the continuous transference of horror and monstrosity across inner and outer circles. It is important to note that, in general terms, the taboo stands on an ambivalent tension between desire and prohibition; it represents a cultural interdiction of a strong unconscious inclination (Freud 41-44). A clear example of this monstrous taboo in *Freak Show* can be found in two scenes involving the two antithetical and rival characters upon which this ambivalent tension rests: Jimmy Darling, a member of the freak show with syndactyly played by Evan Peters, and Dandy Mott, a murderous member of the normative realm played by Finn Wittrock.

In the first of these scenes, the audience is introduced to an upper-middle class household where a Tupperware party is taking place (Ep.1). The conversation in this women-only gathering revolves around the partygoers' declining marital sex lives, and, among these characters, one seems especially tense and upset. At this point, the audience witnesses how a woman emerges from a dark hallway smiling at the chatting party on her way to an interior swimming pool sitting area, right before the gathering's hostess announces to the distressed character that it is her turn. The camera follows this distressed woman along the dark hallway just to discover a bedroom where Jimmy, a character firmly and explicitly framed in the story in terms of the monstrous freak show, awaits on a bed. Here the narrative reveals that the normatively-perceived monstrosity of Jimmy's hands is being used by the gathered women for sexual release.

The second scene takes place in the same household where another of these Tupperware parties brings the audience to the already familiar setting and dynamics, only to reveal a different, juxtaposing, outcome (Ep. 9). After a drunk Jimmy has been unable to perform his sexual role and is dispatched by the group of disappointed women, the charming Dandy Mott appears at the front door. With the excuse of a broken car, Dandy gains access to the house to make a phone call and leaves the audience in suspense when he walks in with a disquieting smile on his face. Before long, the consequences of Dandy's visit are revealed. When the hostess's husband arrives, he, as well as the audience, discovers a blood bath: all the women have been murdered and left floating in the now blood-filled interior swimming pool.

Jimmy and Dandy configure intra-narratively as opposite poles of the monster's taboo in the story. Whereas Jimmy stands in the pole of an unconscious

sexual desire, Dandy stands in the interdicting one, acting as the violent and ritualized purification of the taboo's abject element. The normative order is re-inscribed and bolstered by punishing the point of contact between normative and monstrous realms, transferring to the pool's water the ability to cleanse the abject traces left by their taboo transgression from the floating corpses. Yet horror and monstrosity within *Freak Show's* fictional normative realm cannot be said to be analogous to that of its intended audience; as I mentioned above, the story's plot is aligned with the clearly intelligible oppressed position occupied by the members of the freak show. Although it can be argued that, intra-narratively, Dandy is coded in terms of normative containment and repression of the monstrous taboo, his own murderous actions result, through extra-narrative links between the series and its audience, in the transference of monstrosity to his own character. Hence, an important element to bear in mind is the different ways in which abjection and monstrosity manifest through the TV series extra-narratively – that is, beyond its plot and fictional frame. In order to address these extra-narrative connections between the series and the sociocultural realm, it is important to address the relationship between abjection, monstrosity, and an element that plays a pervasive, though multifaceted, role in the contemporary moment: neoliberalism. It is toward an analysis of this relationship that I now turn.

### **Commodity monsters, neoliberal taboos**

As derived from Kristeva's analysis, in terms of sociocultural regulation, abjection, by means of its prohibition and rejection, results in the instauration of the normative order. In addition, abjection can also be approached as the frame to control, release, and contain abject desire itself. *Freak Show* would appear, from its production to its mass consumption in 2014, as a way of releasing and containing abject desire – abject desire that, in its extra-narrative context, codifies issues such as gender, race, age, or sexuality through the figure of the monster.<sup>6</sup> It is interesting to highlight at least one of these issues: sexuality. Some of the actors playing the series' main characters, Sarah Paulson and Denis O'Hare, as well as its co-creator and main figure behind it, Ryan Murphy, are outspoken members of the queer community. In fact, all the seasons of the series, as well as most of Ryan Murphy's projects, deal with or gravitate around gender and sexuality.<sup>7</sup> This centrality of

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<sup>6</sup> Butler warns of the ways in which filmic or cultural representation can be deployed as means to police the normative borders (*Bodies* 85-86).

<sup>7</sup> Murphy's recent *Project Pose* (Murphy et al.), actually depicts the drag ball's world that appeared in *Paris is Burning* (Livingston), albeit with several controversial changes that make it fit a mainstream audience.

gender and sexuality in the series is of vital importance regarding representation for communities that need a referent, a socioculturally intelligible identification model, in order to be recognized and to access conditions of livability.<sup>8</sup> However, bearing in mind the assimilationist pull exerted from neoliberal structures, to become visible within the realm of normativity, especially when dealing with a mainstream cultural production,<sup>9</sup> would entail an ossification of certain identities and an increase of oppression and erasure of certain experiences and lives. This paradox of representation<sup>10</sup> – the need to appear and the resistance to normative oppression – is drastically resolved in the narrative by the end of the series when assimilation imposes itself as a precondition for survival, offering death as its only alternative. Characters who become assimilated, such as Jimmy Darling, or Desiree Dupree, played by Angela Bassett, and the conjoined sisters Bette and Dot Tattler, played by Sarah Paulson, appear as full-time members of the normative realm – married, with children, and abiding by what seem like traditional sociocultural norms – while the rest of the members of the freak show are massacred by Dandy Mott.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, *Freak Show* as a cultural object can be regarded as a mainstream re-assimilation of a film from the 1930s that informs the series' plot and characters: *Freaks* (Browning). In *Freak Show*, the hues and connotations of horror and monstrosity of the original film are rearticulated to meet the current frames of intelligibility in terms of sexuality or ableness, among others.

However, before I continue this analysis, it is important to tackle a notion I have been mentioning up to this point, a notion that plays a pivotal role both in the context of *Freak Show's* narrative and production as a cultural object, as well as in the current situation and intelligibility of the figure of the monster: neoliberalism. Neoliberalism broadly denotes the manifold and overlapping political, economic, and sociocultural stances and agendas that, sustained on expanding market logics and intricately connected to the notion of globalization, have been deeply transforming sociality, especially for the last three decades (Harvey; Connell). Far from being restrained to processes of deregularization and privatization of public systems and structures, neoliberal logics aim at, and result in, the expansion of

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<sup>8</sup> As Butler points out: "To be radically deprived of recognition threatens the very possibility of existing and persisting" (*Notes* 40).

<sup>9</sup> In the case of *Freak Show*, mainstream would apply both to its production and international distribution and access to media markets.

<sup>10</sup> See works such as *Antigone's Claim* (Butler) or *The Aftermath of Feminism* (McRobbie) for a deep exploration of this double movement.

<sup>11</sup> Authors like Robert Sevenich approach *Freak Show's* plot and its characters as a critique of the process of exclusion and discrimination underlying the commodification of certain political/cultural positions and the exploitation of marginalized populations (47-49).

market dynamics into, and the economization of, realms which were alien to them, such as those of emotional and social relations (Brown). Put simply, neoliberal logics and dynamics are not restrained to the political arena. The emotional implications of neoliberalism and its ensuing strategies and social/political articulations, which link it to ideas of freedom, choice, and self-reliance, carry neoliberalism well into the sociocultural sphere (Spade; McRobbie 51-52).

These connections among politics, economics, and the sociocultural realm are precisely what Michel Foucault addressed in a series of lectures delivered in 1979. Foucault approaches neoliberalism as not only a form of governmental practice, but as a new system of discursive practices of knowledge and subject production. As Foucault makes clear, neoliberalism, which would stand for a new socially-articulating way of thinking, should not be confused with liberalism or other previous forms of capitalist governance: "We should not be under the illusion that today's neo-liberalism is ... the resurgence or recurrence of old forms of liberal economics which were formulated in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.... It represents an absolutely important mutation with regard to traditional liberal projects" (Foucault 117).

If, as Foucault points out, in the eighteenth and nineteenth century the market became a place of veridiction and knowledge production re-articulating governmental practices, in the frame of the neoliberal world, the market, economy, and ideas of expansive, global competition permeate and transform society, culture, and politics at their core. Nonetheless, this does not mean that neoliberalism erases previous notions or ideas that emerged in the two previous centuries; quite the opposite, neoliberalism represents a complex discursive entanglement where the intelligibility of the subject, with all its complexity and its links to other sites of knowledge production, is approached from an economic perspective (Foucault 252). Following Foucault, Shannon Winnubst warns of the dangers posed by this political/social system to the way that queer politics have been articulated in the last three decades. In her account, neoliberalism results in a situation of all-pervasive fungibility, where every single subject enters into the neoliberal economy, producing an effect of commodification and co-optation, as well as a collapse of ethics and social values (Winnubst 88, 92-94). Not only is each and every subject taken as interchangeable, and ultimately disposable and replaceable, but so are the conceptual models and socioculturally-bound identities to which those subjects are linked – be it "the Black," "the Latino," "the lesbian," "the gay," "the trans," and so on – since they can be mobilized in the neoliberal market of production and consumption. *Freak Show* would exemplify, both intra- and extra-narratively, the pervasiveness of the neoliberal fungible assimilation and

depoliticization noted by Winnubst: from the interchangeable role of the members of both the inner and outer circle, as exemplified by the normatively arranged life of the freak show's surviving members (Ep. 13), to the prime-time replacement of traditional narratives by issues that, from sexuality and race to ableness and physical appearance, would seemingly represent a transgression of deceitfully preempted regulatory taboos.

However, I would like to suggest that, despite appearances, this supposed fungibility is not that pervasive. Not everybody is fungible within current social/political frames; not everybody can have access to the neoliberal discursive market, no matter how hard they try. One of the most relevant characteristics of neoliberalism is its window-dressing strategy of diversity. It is true that identity categories become a market product readily assimilated into the neoliberal logic. As already mentioned, identity categories such as "the gay," "the trans," or "the Black" are mobilized in terms of production and consumption articulating processes of value extraction that range from the entertainment industry to the job market. Nevertheless, this identity assimilation and commodification comes at the expense of the further erasure of growing parts of the population that, in the last decades, have resulted in increasing situations of precarity.<sup>12</sup> That is, the window-dressing illusion by which certain subjects, taken as representatives of those categories, appear as the fulfillment of the neoliberal promise of universal access to its market of production and consumption conceals the lived experience of violence and oppression endured by some members of the populations they attempt to represent. These are populations from which the market value cannot be extracted; they constitute social experiences that cannot be absorbed by normative structures, resulting in abject positions that articulate a cultural taboo directly linked to expansive neoliberal cultural, political, and economic markets.

Returning to *Freak Show*, this sort of abject subject positions, extra-narratively embodied by those social groups and experiences whose oppression is concealed by window-dressing strategies of diversity and neoliberal visibility, find their intra-narrative counterparts in characters such as the mentioned massacred members of the freak show (Ep.13). These are characters whose nonproductive value results in their radical, deadly exclusion. Interestingly, the element of abjection also finds a connection with a tangential character whose lurking and discontinuous presence in the series threatens the narrative as a whole by posing a danger to all the characters upon which the story rests: the twisted, murdering

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<sup>12</sup> See analyses on these situations such as those found in *Normal Life* (Spade), "Transfeminine Brokenness, Radical Transfeminism" (Raha), or *Precarious Life* (Butler).

clown played by John Carroll Lynch. The connection with this character, who inhabits a space that is neither the inner nor the outer circle, and whose rage is directed to the members of both the freak show and the normative realm, does not derive from its intra-narrative bloodlust; it derives from the abject horror it articulates. This is an abject horror that needs to be policed and contained in order to maintain the progression and development of the intelligible overall plot line. And it is precisely toward the abject threat of disruption that the figure of the monster poses to the normative progression of normative systems and structures, discursively and materially, temporally and spatially, that I turn in the last step of my analysis.

### **A monstrous story of queer and abject temporalities**

As I have noted, from their abject location, the subject positions and bodily experiences codified by the figure of the monster have the potential to disrupt normative structures and systems from within. They inhabit a liminal time/space where sociocultural intelligibility is negotiated and challenged. This is an area of possibilities and potentialities of transformation in terms of embodiment, kinship systems, and social and political organization; it is a queer time and space (Halberstam; Muñoz). With this I am not saying that to inhabit this spatial/temporal area is comfortable or even preferred by those who populate it. To inhabit this space entails a tension between the need to exist, appear, and be recognized, and the resistance to normative, oppressive constraints. And it is precisely this tension that results in the potential for transformation. Thus, considering the oppressive and violent policing exerted on these abject positions, it can be argued that the figure of the monster inhabits not only a queer, but also an abject temporality which cannot be commensurate with normative regulatory schemata. Yet, by addressing this queer and abject realm in terms of temporality, I do not intend to conflate such differently perceived elements such as time and space. When facing the supposed dichotomy between materiality and abstraction regulating time and space, it could be argued that this dichotomy constitutively arises within certain normative regulations of subject formation articulating parameters of intelligibility.<sup>13</sup> The material/immaterial ideas articulating space and time in normative terms – a place and a time to live, to sleep, to work and be productive, to enjoy and to die – collapse when freed from the regulatory parameters that organize the normative order; that is, the parameters through which the subjects

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<sup>13</sup> See, for instance, different psychoanalytic approaches to the role of time and space in the process of subject formation, such as those in *Time in Psychoanalysis* (Green), *Boundaries and Bridges* (Sabbadini), or *Time, Space and Phantasy* (Perelberg).

come to understand themselves. And this collapse enables a new temporality, a queer temporality, where normative, regulatory structures do not apply.

It is precisely through the abject position inhabited by the figure of the monster/freak that *Freak Show* exposes the normative regulation of space and time behind social intelligibility. If sexual, gender, racial, or able-bodied normativity is articulated in the show through temporal connections that bind the normative realm to productive daytime rhythms and structures, the realm of monster/freak cannot be said to appear as its exact opposite. Although the temporality inhabited by the monster is deeply linked in to nighttime in *Freak Show*, far from being a mere space/time for normative release and contention, it reveals the discursive nature of the structures delineating the normative border. In this sense, the notion of chrononormativity by Elizabeth Freeman is very revealing. As Freeman argues, “naked flesh is bound into socially meaningful embodiment through temporal regulation” (3). Following this, time would be intimately bound to space through bodily, material experience. Hence, chrononormativity refers to the discursive, material, and spatial regulation of population through time, “the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity” (Freeman 3). As an effect of this regulation, institutional forces – such as schedules or calendars and their ensuing biorhythms – are internalized as natural. This idea of time as chronobiopolitics (Freeman 4) – namely, time as regulation of population – gains relevance when looked at in light of the neoliberal effects on social intelligibility as addressed before. However, how can the figure of the monster expose this chrononormative regulation?

To answer this, I now turn to an important element within these queer temporalities: the idea of temporal drag (Freeman). Temporal drag is a notion that stands for a sort of disruption of the temporal flow that evidences the discursive nature of time and its temporal organization. Once again, *Freak Show* offers several interesting moments of temporal drag which are deployed intra- and extra-narratively. A clear example of this temporal drag appears intra-narratively at the peak of the monster’s irruption into the realm of visibility: the daily/episodic performance of the freak show. Central to this performance is the moment when one of the members of the show sings a song for the audience. Although the narrative is set in the 1950s, some of the songs performed deliberately and effectively break the time frame. This is an intention which is made very clear from the beginning of the season when Elsa Mars performs David Bowie’s 1971 song “Life on Mars” (Ep. 1) and maintained throughout the plot by other moments such as Jimmy’s – played by Evan Peters – performance of Nirvana’s 1991 song “Come as You Are” (Ep. 7). This deployment of temporal drag has interesting effects with

regard to the contextual situation of the story. By disrupting the temporal frame, the intra-narrative freak/monster performance transfers its target audience from the characters seated in front of the stage to the audience watching the TV series. That is, it establishes a participatory relation with an audience who, up until that moment, have remained in an observant position. It produces a movement from object to subject by which the subject – in this case the audience of *Freak Show* – becomes aware of the fictionality of the whole story; a fictionality that is culturally articulated through filmic and narrative conventions that permeate society. It should also be noted that this temporal disruption is not only circumscribed to these narrative moments, but also constitutes an overall extra-narrative characteristic of the series as a whole: the closed, independent plot line of each season and the anthology-like structure of the series allows for a continuous dislocation of temporal linearity, where seasons are not chronologically ordered.<sup>14</sup>

This is an abject disruption directly linked to the disruption of culturally constituted systems and structures enacted by those bodies and experiences that border normative intelligibility. These are bodies and experiences of which the sociocultural unintelligibility appears as a horror to be policed. They emerge as a monstrosity articulating regulatory taboos the transgression of which entails violent consequences. The temporal disruption enacted by these impossible, abject lives allows for a glimpse into the discursive nature of spatial/temporal normative organization and regulation of populations. It reveals how cultural regulation crystalizes the organization of bodies, where they can be, how they can behave, how they are understood. In other words, it reveals how the subject comes to understand itself through the historical, temporal trace of those power structures regulating intelligibility. Hence, the disruption of the normative temporality, the irruption into the legible realm and its intelligible history – be it through cultural manifestations or material embodiment – brings to the fore the limits, the borders of sociocultural intelligibility.

### **Queering the final curtain**

As a brief conclusion to my argument, I would like to return to Stryker's call for resistance, the one that opened these pages. Even if the current process or reorganization of sociocultural intelligibility and power relations keeps bolstering

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<sup>14</sup> "'That Magic Box Lies': Queer Theory, Seriality, and *American Horror Story*," (Geller and Banker) offers a detailed analysis of temporal drag of *American Horror Story: Coven* (Murphy and Falchuk 2013), a previous season of the series. In it, they approach the queer temporal disruption of the story in intra- and extra-narrative terms; from its plot and its continuous temporal dislocations to the overall structure of the series.

normative structures by oppressing and hardening the conditions of some lives and experiences, the position inhabited by these same lives, their own monstrosity, can be reclaimed as a means of resistance and transformation. As shown by *American Horror Story: Freakshow* through its intra- and extra-narrative connections to the sociocultural realm, the monster inhabits an abject and queer temporality, a time/space located in the tension between assimilation and resistance. And this queer time/space offers a ground for potential resistance and transformation, a ground for different ways of signification and organization. And when the bodies inhabiting that liminal time/space irrupt into the realm of visibility – sometimes in concert, sometimes alone, by collective demonstration or by a singular claim for rights, be it in the streets or through the media – they expose, even if in a transient way, the limits of the realm of intelligibility, and allow for a shift and resignification of those same limits. Far from being the mere target for sociocultural regulation and violent control, the monster lurks in the shadows of the normative realm, waiting for its chance to disrupt and transform its systems and structures. This is a monster that cannot be vanquished easily; this is a monster that is here to stay.

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