"Come Out, Come Out, Wherever You Are"

Queering *American Horror Story*

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Abstract:
Television becomes an increasingly more inclusive space for the representations of marginalized communities, yet many queer characters are sequestered to supporting roles, storylines dealing with queer themes are subordinate within the greater diegeses, and shows emphatically committed to foregrounding queer experiences are predominantly compartmentalized to the peripheries of television on identity-specific or niche cable networks. Thus, queer spectators have become accustomed to constructing secondary or alternative texts within predominant ones in order to derive pleasure from and solidarity with televisual narratives. As queer persons are discriminated against, violated, and coded with fear and contempt in society, FX's anthology series *American Horror Story* (2011—present) is a unique and challenging text that confronts issues of queer visibility, provides queer performers and creators a vehicle to contribute to cultural conversations, and gives audiences a lens to glean meaning. Each season of *American Horror Story* features different narratives, settings, time periods, and characters. My paper positions each of the four season as case studies to interrogate the show's formal and textual approaches for illuminating queer subjectivities. First, I examine the horror genre and ghost story traditions used in Season One: *Murder House*; these approaches perpetually destabilizes the image of the nuclear heteronormative family as queer characters infiltrate the haunted environment. Next, through an analysis of Season Two: *Asylum*, I put the show's unique anthology form in conversation with the ontology of performance to claim that queer actors are not only afforded diverse queer roles—and vice versa—but are equally unbound from any singular or reductive identity. This approach suggests that the fluidity of performance mirrors that of sexuality and gender. Season Three: *Coven's* excessive and subversive camp aesthetics are posited in order to understand the show's appeal for queer audiences. Finally, I read Season Four: *Freak Show*—chronicling freak show performers in South Florida during the 1950s—as an allegory of the current alienation, exploitation, and commodification of "othered" queer individuals. *Freak Show* confronts the social and political pressures for queer people to assimilate or surrender to imminent death—both metaphorical and literal. Thus, I argue that *American Horror Story*, as a horror anthology series, not only provides sustainable viewing pleasures for queer spectators but also a platform for contemporary discourse and televisual activism.

Scared Straight

1 As television becomes an increasingly more inclusive space for marginalized communities, many queer characters are still sequestered to supporting roles, storylines dealing with queer themes are subordinate within the greater diegeses, and shows emphatically committed to foregrounding queer experiences are predominantly compartmentalized to the peripheries of television. Identity-specific or niche cable networks like *Logo, PrideVision,* and

— for a time — *Bravo* specifically catered to queer sensibilities, even branding themselves with the tagline, "Gay Television; No Apologies".[1] Subscribers of gay-themed channels are called to identify with the preset niche categories. These niche networks' pigeonholed identities along with limited accessibility for audiences reinforce the notion that queer spectators are indeed marginal.

2 Concurrently, in the 1990s and early 2000s, sitcoms and dramas on major networks began featuring gay supporting characters thereby establishing a platform for periodically gay-themed episodes. Even on mainstream television today, heterosexuality is framed in conjunction with normalcy, and queer characters are positioned as foils to leading players. When shows aim to appeal to wide heterosexual audiences, there are usually implicit disclaimers when confronting queer issues, and shows draw attention to their efforts to integrate gay characters or subplots into the narratives as a display of commonality. In order for these shows to remain commercially lucrative, gay and lesbian characterizations and narratives are often negotiated; queer images and storylines can exist only if they lend themselves to commodification. Hence, stereotypes and attractive queer hyperboles permeate into the shows, usually taking the form of flamboyant comrades to the main players. Spectators pining for non-stereotypical queer representations have become accustomed to constructing secondary or alternative texts within predominant ones in the interest of deriving pleasure from and solidarity with televisual narratives.

3 Exploiting the freedoms of cable television, FX's adult-oriented horror anthology series *American Horror Story* (2011 – present) is divorced from specific gender and sexual binaries and persuasions. Employing melodramatic traditions and paying homage to horror conventions, the show's general commercial lure is its grotesque transgressive tenets, sensory and emotional provocation, and sadomasochistic nuances. Yet as queer persons are discriminated against, violated, and coded with fear and contempt in society and on television, *American Horror Story* is a unique and challenging text that confronts issues of queer visibility, and gives queer performers and creators a vehicle to contribute to cultural conversations.

4 Each season of *American Horror Story* features different narratives, settings, time periods, and characters. Engaging with preexisting queer theories and discourses, my paper

[1] *Here!* TV uses the tagline "Gay Television. No Apologies" on an advertisement for the TV special, "Dante's Cove." See pages 217 to 221 of Anthony Freitas' "Gay Programming, Gay Public: Public and Private Tension in Lesbian and Gay Cable Channels" in *Cable Vision: Television Beyond Broadcasting*.

positions each of the four seasons as case studies in order to interrogate the show's formal and textual approaches and handling of queer subjectivities. First, I examine the horror genre and ghost story traditions within Season One: *Murder House*. These components perpetually destabilize the image of the nuclear heteronormative family as queer characters infiltrate the haunted environment. Next, through an analysis of Season Two: *Asylum*, I put the show's unique anthology form in conversation with the ontology of performance to claim that queer actors are not only afforded queer roles – and vice versa – but are equally unbound from any singular identity. This approach suggests that the fluidity of performance mirrors that of sexuality and gender. After, Season Three: *Coven*'s excessive and subversive Camp aesthetics are posited in order to understand the show's appeal for queer audiences. Finally, I read Season Four: *Freak Show* – chronicling freak show performers in South Florida during the 1950s – as an allegory of the more recent alienation, exploitation, and televisual commodification of 'othered' queer individuals. *Freak Show*'s secondary text confronts the social and political pressures for queer people to either assimilate or surrender to an imminent death – both metaphorically and literally.

5 It is important to note that although each examination is paired with a specific season of the show for analysis; the themes and theories explored are relevant throughout the entire series and therefore not exclusive to the season in conversation. Additionally, in this paper the term 'queer', while possessing a political or revolutionary spirit, is meant to be inclusive of – yet distinct from – gay, lesbian, bi, and trans perspectives as it acknowledging that those categories are still reductive and prescriptive in their own right. Here, 'queer' is also used to code for the 'otherness' that is intentionally brought forward and, to quote theorist Samuel A. Chambers in regards to queer theory, "call attention to that which is marginal with respect to dominate norms" (Chambers 18). To apply theorist Alexander Doty's concept, 'queerness' critiques gender and sexual binaries in order to attest that there are non-straight truths outside of conventional "hetero paradigms".[2]

[2] In the Introduction of *Making Things Perfectly Queer* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), Alexander Doty defines "hetero paradigms" as notions connected to heterocentric ideologies (xv-4).

The Ghosts Come Out of the Closet: *Murder House* and Horror

6 In its most simplified meaning, horror examines the tension between the normal and abnormal, the known and the unknown. Applying J. Mitchell Miller's theories on 'otherness' "[t]he other is […] different or alien to the self or social identities",[3] so horror confronts this separation and problematic distinction. As a genre or categorization of media film and television, if terror exists beyond the frame and deliberately permeates into the frame, horror imagines an environment where 'othered' identities are allowed to come out and play. Thus the order of the heteronormative world is disturbed – a world in which "everyone and everything is judged from the perspective of straight" (Chambers 35). Mapping the evolution of horror, these 'other' temperaments consistently take the symbolic form of monsters, ghosts, zombies, and extra-terrestrial aliens. They are embodiments of disruptive, abnormal forces that transcend classifications. Accordingly, horror grants access for ghosts and monsters to invade the traditional and familiar space, and serves as a kind of rebellion against a larger hegemonic institution. The narratives position the unknown entities as intruders and are wrought with dread and discomfort. This arrangement equates the unearthed diegetic paranoia to that of queer panic.

7 *American Horror Story*: *Murder House* builds upon these horror traditions to showcase the failures of a nuclear heterosexual family as ghosts terrorize them in their new home. After Vivien Harmon discovers her husband Ben having an affair with his young patient, the Harmons, along with their daughter Violet, relocate to Los Angeles to restore their marriage and start anew. They purchase a Victorian-style house on a short sale only to learn that the house has a sordid history of murders committed from within. As they try to maintain sanity and unity as a family, numerous supernatural intruders – both evil and benevolent ghosts – thwart their livelihood. Scholar Patricia White explains that within the realm of horror, "homosexuality, like the haunting itself… work[s] implicitly behind the scenes" (White 62), and is eventually forced into the known space.

8 Horror distinguishes concerns surrounding visibility, and confrontationally brings 'othered' or queer characters to the forefront. Some of the ghosts use their inherent queer positions to threaten the Harmon's hetero-nuclear lifestyle applying non-traditional sexual practices. Some ghosts are unequivocally gay or engage in homosexual acts; as they demonstrate

[3] J. Mitchell Miller, "Otherness," *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods* (SAGE Publications, Inc, Sept. 15, 2008) http://www.sage-ereference.com/view/research/n304.xml

these practices, they destabilize Ben and Vivien's marriage. Particularly, they prey on Ben Harmon and intensify his emotional and sexual frailty. They subvert his sexual attention in order to call attention to his sexual duplicity. Exemplifying this, Moira, a 60-year-old ghost unable to leave the house, is the Harmon's housekeeper. Though she appears gaunt and nonsexual to those who look upon her, to Ben she materializes as a young temptress. Throughout the season, she poses suggestively in front of Ben and projects an air of palpable sexual energy as she completes household duties. At one point, she antagonistically has sex with another female ghost in order to disrupt and disturb Ben's gaze and damage his relationship with Vivien.

9 Before the Harmons move into the house, a gay couple, Patrick and Chad, occupies the house before another ghost executes them.[4] Disguised as interior decorators, they return to haunt the Harmons. In one scene, the Harmons congregate in the kitchen to discuss ways to improve the Harmon's Halloween decorations. Patrick intentionally cuts his hand with a pumpkin knife and asks Ben to assist him with a bandage in the upstairs bathroom. As Ben helps Patrick clean and dress the wound, Patrick makes advances on him and grabs his genitals and offers him oral sex – at which point Ben recoils and explains that he is not gay. While Ben never succumbs to Patrick's proposition, the mere suggestion of a homoerotic energy implies that Ben – and his family – are touched by the supernatural[5] and forced to encounter queerness. This encounter contributes to the fragmentation of the Harmon's heteronormative monogamy and centricity.

10 Although not all ghosts in the show are explicitly queer – as they embody a breadth of gender and sexual projections – symbolically, 'ghosts' do however connote queer or marginal subjectivities. Scholar Samuel A. Chambers attests that ghosts – as cinematic or literary representations — code for the "closeted existence" (41) mirroring the situation of many queer individuals at odds with a community's expectations. The ghosts exist in a liminal space between the spiritual and material worlds and are not welcome to live entirely in either. Chambers continues to explain that within politically and socially conservative communities, queer individuals are also not indiscriminately permitted to express sexuality without restraint and therefore must either surrender their nature to the demands of the culture or find a space to exist elsewhere. Here, presence can only exist in the absence. In *Murder House*, on the other hand, the

[4] *American Horror Story: Murder House*, Episode 5, Halloween Part One, Dir. David Semel, Aired Nov. 11, 2011.
[5] In her book UnInvited, Patricia White equates "queerness" to being "touched by the supernatural." See pages 61-63.

ghosts reclaim sexuality and unambiguously actualize their own authenticity. This phenomenon suggests a renegotiation of boundaries and a kind of repossession and transferal of the terror inflicted upon them.

11 In many horror film and television narratives, there is heterosexual closure for the victims of the haunting.[6] The family unit is thereby restored and heterosexual love between the main characters may endure as the ghosts retreat. Unlike these common horror narratives, at the end of *Murder House*, all three Harmons die within the house and are absorbed into the supernatural realm. It can be inferred that the hypocrisies and pitfalls of their heterosexual practices are punished. The straight characters are no longer permitted to enact their sexuality in the world and are spirited into the closet and become 'othered'. *Murder House* imagines a situation in which hetero-normalcy is dethroned, and *straights* are forced to live in a hereafter among *queers*. Therefore, their atypical happiness can only be derived from a space in which queerness' manifestation is legitimized and acknowledged.

Uncommitted: *Asylum*, the Fluidity of Sexuality, and the Ontology of Performance

12 In *American Horror Story: Asylum* (Season Two), Lily Rabe plays Sister Mary Eunice, a prudent, devout postulate who serves as an attendant at Briarcliff Sanitarium for the criminally insane in the 1960s. Early in the season, inconsolable parents bring their unhinged son – who they believe to be possessed by the devil – to Briarcliff to seek counsel from religious officials. After several attempts to treat him with psychotherapy and electroshock therapy, the priest performs an exorcism. During the ritual, the devil transfers from the body of the boy into that of Sister Mary Eunice. Unlike the uncontrollably violent inhabitance of the boy's body, the devil's occupancy of Sister Mary Eunice is more inconspicuous and furtively destructive. She is used as a vessel for the devil to enact terror on Briarcliff and its patients. As demonstrated in Rabe's performance, the character transitions from a virtuous, prude, and compassionate figure into a manipulative, sexually aberrant, and altogether wicked incarnation. In order to acquire supremacy at Briarcliff, the devil must 'perform' and appear to be human. This specific diegetic scenario posits the tension between performance and the authentication of the self. In a single

[6] White uses Robert Wise's 1961 film *The Haunting* as an example for how heterosexual love is reinstated in the end of the film once the ghosts are spirited away. See pages 78-80.

season, Rabe's character's inhabitance changes, and as a result "she" – the duality of the actor and the role, the spirit and the body – is in flux.

13 *Asylum* hyperbolizes the concept of theatricality and performance in a variety of capacities.[7] Within the world of the story, the Briarcliff's patients – or more appropriately prisoners – must perform sanity in order to leave the institution and integrate into society. They can either act authentically and risk staying committed to Briarcliff or alternatively 'perform' in conjunction with societal criteria. Similarly, queer individuals who do not conform to sex-role expectations and exhibit the permissible interest in the opposite sex are castigated. Subsequently, societal institutions toil to sequester the behavior divergent of acceptable expressions of heterosexuality, because as scholar Jack Babuscio suggests, "Gayness is seen as […] a collective denial of the moral and social order of things" (123). Analogous to the practice of passing as sane, passing for straight is indicative of a queer experience and thereby forcing queers to transform into synthetic being.

14 Extending upon this notion, one character – Lana Winters (played by Sarah Paulson, who is openly queer but does not adhere to a specific sexual orientation),[8] a journalist who attempts cover a story on Briarcliff and its atrocities – is committed to the sanatorium for her homosexuality and having a same-sex partner. Lana, a victim of discrimination, must decide whether she will perform straight or remain a prisoner. As she refuses to perform heterosexual interest and confess sexual reformation, Briarcliff's psychiatrist, Dr. Thredson, determined to cure her homosexual illness, kidnaps and rapes her. After facing abuse and near death, Lana escapes imprisonment only to be wrongfully and ironically placed back in the care of Sister Mary Eunice at Briarcliff. As Lana tries to explain that Dr. Thredson (played by Quinto) raped her, Mary Eunice – or the devil – tells her that she is pregnant with Thredson's child. Mary Eunice informs her that if she acknowledges and embraces the pregnancy, she is effectively cured from her illness, but if she terminates the pregnancy she will remain branded as a lesbian. This quandary is a metaphor for the ultimatums with which queer individuals are confronted. The oppressive heterocentric institution dictates Lana's sexuality.

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[7] In *Cinema as Camp (AKA Camp and the Gay Sensibility)*, Jack Babuscio discusses the theater as a model for life and how "roles" must adhere to heteronormative standards. Thus, gays and lesbian, as 'roles' in society, are unaccepted. See pages 123-124.

[8] In an interview, Sarah Paulson discusses her experience with *American Horror Story* in relation to her own sexual identity: http://www.afterellen.com/tv/230031-sarah-paulson-talks-sexuality-and-freak-show

15 *American Horror Story*'s non-traditional anthology form transcends cinematic and televisual paradigms that ultimately bestow narrative and thematic autonomies. Customarily, television lends itself to long-form storytelling, as demonstrated with serials that sustain for decades. Unlike the film form, which typically works towards a definitive ending, television shows are afforded the opportunity to endure, expand, and experiment. Yet, television still has an ephemeral quality; shows are susceptible to abrupt extinction should networks deem the efforts unprofitable. *American Horror Story* simultaneously speaks to both of these televisual traditions: the expansive and the fleeting. Like other anthologies and serialized shows, each season of *American Horror Story* is predicated on an entirely different story, setting, and characters while retaining consistent themes, moods, and horror and soap opera attributes. Although *American Horror Story* is not the first anthology series and now runs alongside other shows like HBO's *True Detective* (2014 – present) and FX's *Fargo* (2014 – present) which also promise new premises and sets of characters/actors with each new season, *American Horror Story* is distinct in that it appropriates the troupe theatre model; it uses many of the same actors each season but casts them in diverse roles. From season to season, actors who play supporting or guest roles fill main roles, actors who play heroes return as villains, and actors who play straight or non-binary parts play queer characters. By extension, this grants queer actors the opportunity to play given queer characters. Two specific examples are Zachary Quinto and Sarah Paulson: Quinto plays a gay supporting role in *Murder House* but transitions into a heterosexual leading antagonist in *Asylum*; conversely, Paulson plays a supporting character who does not articulate a sexual preference in Season One but plays Lana — a queer leading player — in *Asylum*.[9]

16 On one hand, this model gives actors a range of diverse roles and focuses on dynamic queer characters. It maintains superlative narrative inventiveness and successfully keeps audiences enraptured in the perpetually evolving and expanding *American Horror Story* universe. It also does not restrict actors to certain sex roles or orientations within that universe. Because of this, queer and straight actors are allowed to play characters that reflect their own sexual identities but also can transcend these binaries. The image of the actor is not cemented in the *American Horror Story* role they play on one particular season – queer, straight, or undefined. In many queer paradigms on television when the sexual preference of the character

[9] In an interview with *New York Magazine*, Actor Zachary Quinto spoke publically about his sexual orientation. "What's Up, Spock?" by Benjamin Wallace, New York Magazine, October 17, 2011. http://nymag.com/movies/features/zachary-quinto-2011-10/

does not align with the orientation of the actor portraying the character, audiences are asked to recognize the division between the actor and role. Lynne Joyich acutely articulates this nuance of performance:

TV may attempt to employ 'diegetically real queers' to assure audiences of the disconnection between gay and straight, identity and mask, yet 'non-diegetically real queers' may provoke epistemological crises along these same fault lines. There are countless [shows] in which actors cast in gay roles strive to create unassailable divisions between the person and the part (10-11).

17 Speaking to Joyrich's point, in serialized shows, actors are often pressured to pronounce the divisions between the role and their personal lives. The actors in *American Horror Story* do not have to emphasize this distinction the same way other TV actors must. Here, the element of performance is constantly oscillating, so the viewers are only asked to acknowledge the truth of the character rather than consciously ascertain the resemblance or dissonance between the actor and the role. As such, the variability and impermanence of role-playing is parallel to the fluidity of sexuality. The binaries between gay and straight do not exist, and *American Horror Story* radically argues, "Sex roles are superfluous" (Babuscio 123).

Long Live the Queens: *Coven* and Camp

18 After a grim and repellent second season, *American Horror Story*'s anthology structure gave the third season the chance to reimagine itself and departed considerably in tone and style from its prior installment. While the series retained much if it gothic horror elements, many critics noted its elevated campiness.[10] For this reason, the season's reception was critically divided but did prove to capture dedicated audiences; *Coven*'s finale was the most-watched episode of the series and the shows viewership nearly doubled from the second season.[11] Merely a matter of taste, this increased popularity suggests a celebration of an ingrained aestheticism, so it is important to examine the one of the season's most frequently cited attributes, 'Camp', and how it works to provide transgressive viewing pleasures for queer audiences and validates the queer existence.

[10] *The Hollywood Reporter*'s critic Allison Keene praised *Coven*'s balance of gothic horror and intentional 'camp' aesthetic in an Oct. 7, 2013 review of *American Horror Story: Coven*: http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movie/american-horror-story/review/644348

[11] In an *Entertainment Weekly* article, "'American Horror Story: Coven' Final Most-Watched Yet," James Hibberd examines *Coven*'s increased ratings. *Coven*'s finale totaled about 5.8 million viewers and the season averaged about 4 million viewers. This article was posted on January 17, 2015. http://www.ew.com/article/2014/01/30/american-horror-story-coven-finale-most-watched-yet

19 Before discussing *Coven*'s expression of the Camp aesthetic, it is necessary to bring into conversation the spirit of Camp and its intrinsic connection to queer sensibilities. Camp, according to Susan Sontag's seminal article, functions as an aesthetic above all else and celebrates life as artifice. As a result, Camp offers an alternate set of standards without interrogating or defining what is "good or bad", as Sontag distinguishes. There exist only varying personal indulgences derived from the material at hand, though some could read Camp as an inversion of the good and the bad (Sontag 53-54). Later in her piece, she explains that this aestheticism predominantly contributes to why Camp resonates so strongly with the queer communities.[12] Within Camp's domain, that which is considered "bad" is permitted to be "good". For queer audiences, this upturn of discrimination and classification speaks to the experience of being socially ostracized or condemned and proactively subverting culture. Aestheticism, Sontag argues, is the tool queers use to assimilate into society and "neutralize indignation" (Sontag 54).

20 Babuscio extends Sontag's classifications to tease out the connections between Camp and queer sensibilities. If queers' authentic natures have remained relatively undisclosed, then Camp – as a kind of subculture – can be utilized to communicate gay sensibilities and creative energies that are alternative to the conventional. Social oppression complicates human feelings, and Camp is a response to the need to channel the complicated emotions into something productive, triumphant, and bellicose. *Coven* appropriates these ideals to observe a New Orleans school and refuge for young witches to harvest and refine their diverse supernatural powers. Fiona Goode (played by Jessica Lange) heads Miss Robichaux's Academy for women. She is the 'Supreme' of the coven and must identify the most gifted witch to succeed her as the new reigning Supreme of Robichaux's Academy for Exceptional Young Ladies. The young witches, exiled from their former communities and families, possess powers including clairvoyance, voodoo magic, and the ability to raise the dead. While the season traces the inter-tension and drama between witches in the coven and other outlying witch communities, they ultimately learn they must band together to fight the larger institutional powers laboring to exterminate them.

21 Observing Camp traditions, *Coven* highlights visual opulence in the mise-en-scène as a

[12] Sontag specifically uses the term "homosexual" whereas this paper replaces that term with "queer" for consistency.

mode of expression and tactic to avert pain and deal with hostile diegetic and non-diegetic environments. Miss Robichaux's Academy and its inhabitants prioritize style over substance; their lifestyle is saturated in extreme extravagance. The Academy and living quarters are in a Southern mansion in the Garden District of New Orleans – evoking beauty, ostentation, and an undercurrent of Gothicism. There are tall bay windows sizable enough to let light flood into the tope-colored halls, a grand foyer and staircase, and ornate antique furniture. Complementary with the set decoration, the women's hybridize wardrobes resemble the dark essence often associated with witches but also exude a modern sexuality. Typifying this style, in an early sequence, Fiona forces the young witches out of the house for a tour of the French Quarter. Led by Fiona carrying a black parasol, all the women walk in unison along the city sidewalk within the cinematic frame. Their sleek, black dresses in concert with the hyper-styled filmic framing give off an air of seduction, macabre, and impending narrative danger.

22 Myrtle Snow, played by Frances Conroy, personifies visual eccentricity. Head of the Witches Council and former Miss Robichaux's student, she wears flamboyant vintage attire. Donning vibrantly colored frocks, floral shawls, 1950's cat-eye glasses, lace gloves, and fiercely crimped red hair, Myrtle's couture-conscious image pays tribute to the muses from a campy John Waters films. After being wrongfully accused of crime against a witch and burned at the stake, Myrtle is brought back to life only to enact vengeance on the witches who framed her. Ironically, in the end Myrtle sacrificially confesses her crimes against the other witches and brings herself back to burn at the stake. Accompanied by music icon Stevie's Nick's "Silver Springs", Myrtle – dressed in a crimson gown and chic sunglasses – processes with the young witches back to the stake for death by fire. Again, all the witches are dressed black attire holding parasols – harkening back to the earlier sequence of the witches' procession through the French Quarter. After dousing Myrtle in gasoline, she is asked for her last words. Myrtle says, "Only one", before wailing, "Balenciaga!" Balenciaga was a Spanish fashion designer, and *Coven*'s costume designer disclosed that creator Ryan Murphy wanted Myrtle to "go out in style". Her final words are thus a tribute to fashion.[13]

23. While Myrtle's second execution illuminates the show's deliberate style and melodrama – and an inside joke for viewers familiar with high fashion – the sequence also marks the show's

[13] Lindzi Scharf observes Myrtle Snow's connection to fashion, specifically 'Balenciga', in her article for *Entertainment Weekly*: "Myrtle Snow Wasn't Wearing Balenciaga", Posted January 17, 2015. http://www.ew.com/article/2014/02/03/american-horror-story-coven-myrtle-snow-not-wearing-balenciaga

vulgar interlaying of odd and brutal violence in tandem with dark comedy. Throughout the show, the gratuitous violence, more often than not, is laced with biting humor. Fearing the young witch Madison will replace her as the coven's Supreme, Fiona slits her throat in the coven's drawing room. Fiona leaves her bloodied body on the rug, sits on the sofa, lights a cigarette and says, "This coven doesn't need a new supreme. It needs a new rug".[14] Just as Camp appreciates vulgarity, *Coven* finds innumerable opportunities to pair caustic humor with the gruesome content in order to undercut the anger of the repressed. It does not merely protect the self from the selective external world but also combat the oppressive forces. Even though the comedy serves as an anesthetic for hardship, making light of malicious acts, it also challenges the status quo blurring the binary between right and wrong.

24 It is futile to discuss *American Horror Story: Coven,* a women-centered season, without discussing the iconography and textual significance of the show's consistent leading player, Jessica Lange (the show's primary muse), and her cohort of seasoned female performers: Angela Bassett, Kathy Bates, Frances Conroy, Patti Lupine, and Stevie Nicks. These vibrant, discourteous, brazen performers, all distinguished and celebrated in their respective mediums (television, film, music, and theater) facilitate the series' excessiveness and Camp appeal. Sontag theorizes that Camp hails the element of performance and "instant character", which is defined as "state of continual incandescence – a person being one, very intense thing" (61). In other words, this is the celebration of elegantly aging divas while deriving pleasure in witnessing the anxiety to maintain youth. The troupe of elder witches – all very intense and brilliant personas – exudes uninhibited light.

25 *Coven* interrogates the triumphs and pitfalls of immortality and the unquenchable yearning to stay young. Fiona, the coven's longstanding Supreme, acknowledges the inevitable coronation of a new supreme on the horizon, but refuses to abdicate her sovereignty and surrender to old age and chronic illness. Throughout the season, she strategizes – and murders – in order to preserve her ruling position for as long as possible. Much like Fiona, these female actors who prove they have yet to reach their prime, reclaim the televisual space that customarily favors younger performers. Sontag also asserts that the desire for perpetual youth and significance compatible with queer sensibilities. If 'youth' is emblematic of *social relevance*,

[14] This quote comes from the episode, "The Replacements," *American Horror Story: Coven* 3.3, Dir. Alfonso Gomez-Rejon, Aired Oct. 23, 2013, FX Network.

Fiona's crusade – along with Lange the actress and her supporting cast of divas' collective destruction of cultural classifications and repossession of beauty and power – speaks to queer activists' strive to upset traditional institutional practices.

Conflicting Agendas: Alienation, Commodification, and Assimilation in *Freak Show*

26 If *Coven* conceives of a reality in which marginalized people – characterized by witches and other supernatural beings – are able to unite and vivaciously riot against institutional oppression, Season Four: *Freak Show* is a cynical and lamenting social critique of a world averse and incapable of giving disenfranchised people, specifically 'othered' or queer people, the space to live authentically and unreservedly. As a dark fable, *Freak Show* confronts society's strides to alienate diverse populations as well as the exploitation and commodification of the 'exotic' until it threatens traditional cultural practices.

27 *Freak Show* focuses on the fall of one of the only remaining freak shows in South Florida in the 1950s, a home for rejected, abandoned, and abused individuals labeled as deformed and unfit to join society. Posed as a sanctuary from the cruelty of the external world, "Fräulein Elsa's Cabinet of Curiosities" is home to a troupe of performers in need of income, emotional support, and protection from others who regard them 'monsters'. This season reimagines many of the themes from the 1932 horror film *Freaks* and, like the film, the company includes conjoined twins, 'pinheads', a bearded woman, a strong man, and a woman who is under the impression that she is intersexual. Diegetically and non-diegetically, identities that typically lie on the fringes of society are alternatively illuminated and granted permission and a platform to be courageous, flawed, heroic, and dignified. In the same way society assumes human bodies and sexuality falls into rigid binary systems and those that cannot adhere to those classifications are cast out, the protagonists at the freak show give dignity to the 'othered'.

28 *Freak Show* focuses on the approaching dangers and threats of extinction that Elsa's performers face. Simplistically, *Freak Show* argues that the true monsters in society are the people who disregard and separate people who are different. But perhaps more unforgivable than those who exclude and reject the dignity of those who are different are the sins of those who strive to commoditize and exploit the 'exoticism' of the outcast individuals. This devastating conflict is played out in several corresponding narratives. The most unambiguous embodiment of this evil is the perverted and deplorable Dandy Mott and his feeble-mined mother Gloria. After

attending a show, Dandy becomes fascinated with the performers and demands his mother to purchase the conjoined twins, Bette and Dot, so that he may enjoy and eventually marry them. Initially, Dot is excited at the chance to be celebrated by someone, but her sister Bette distrusts his intentions. Throughout the narrative, his obsession and desire to own the Bette and Dot intensifies and quickly becomes wholly destructive. Fueled by his mother's blind adoration, he holds them captive and murders all those who counteract his efforts.

29 Dandy has traits that classify as a first-class citizen and among the majority: he is a white, handsome, wealthy, heterosexual man. Perhaps more deceitfully, characters with covert abnormalities commoditize and assert control over the freak show performers so they may assimilate and conceal their own deformities. Should their oddities ever be disclosed, society would classify them as 'freaks'. Elsa Mars (played by Jessica Lange) is a German expatriate and the manager of the 'Cabinet of Curiosities'. Elsa, with two hidden prosthetic legs, diverts attention away from her abnormalities through exploiting the oddities of her performers. She is in a perpetual state of ambivalence; though she wants to protect and provide a sanctuary for *her* "rescued monsters", she selfishly taps into the community's desire to gaze upon 'othered' individuals as means to bolster her own recognition. She uses the allure of the other performers as a vehicle to showcase her own musical talents. Seduced by the chance to be discovered, she misuses and sells out the company.

30 Exacerbating Elsa's weakness and greed, conman Stanley, played by the openly queer Denis O'Hare, and his young accomplices disguise themselves as Hollywood talent scouts and prey upon Elsa and her performers. Their primary objective, however, is to kidnap and kill some of the performers in order to sell them as exclusive oddities to a museum. The irony, however, is that Stanley also has an abnormality (unusually large genitalia) which he is able to hide more effortlessly than the freak show performers. Beyond that, Stanley is gay but dons a heterosexual façade in order to seduce and control Elsa. Coupling his physical abnormality with his latent sexual nature, Stanley's case speaks to the demise and impairment of repression of identity. While this is not to suggest that one's suppression of identity inevitably leads to the abuse of others, it does illuminate the consequences of repression on a grander scale. Stanley and Elsa are victims of a homogenous society that condemns practices and natures deviating from the norm; while not completely absolved from responsibility, their malevolent actions are – to an extent – the result of ubiquitous discriminatory cultural ideologies.

31 The theme of commodification corresponds with and comments on the relationship between the TV industry and queer actors and representations onscreen. Returning to the point introduced earlier, Ron Becker outlines the rising presence of gay and lesbian characters and roles on primetime network TV during a period he calls "The Gay 90s", a time of increased gay-themed programming. While visibility of queer character and diegetic scenarios improved after decades that "virtually denied the existence of homosexuality" (Becker 389), the perpetuated images were commercially dictated and disseminated. Queer identities were only welcomed when they could be nicely situated within industrial and economic agenda. Supporting this, quickly executives realized that wealthy, intellectual, liberally minded gays and lesbians were a lucrative market, so conglomerates targeted this specific demographic with corresponding characterization and narratives. Characters resembling this finite image (reflecting the targeted queer audience) proliferated primetime programs and were packaged and sold to audiences who could improve ratings. Consequently, this gave way to stereotypes associated with queer subjectivities and propagated narrow representations. Like the freak show performers, queer lives can only be conditionally acknowledged and praised if there are monetary incentives backing them.

32 *Freak Show* concludes as a 'Juvenalian' satire – a cynical and despondent commentary that suggests society's discrimination is responsible for its own demise. The conditions are such that disadvantaged and rejected 'others' who cannot or refuse to assimilate in the mainstream will be obliterated and deferred to a liminal space elsewhere. There can never be a safe place on Earth for them to enact their own authenticity. Only in a hereafter succeeding death do they have permission to self-actualize. In order to pursue an entertainment career in Hollywood, Elsa abandons the show and sells the performers' contracts to Dandy. In turn, the performers are faced with an ultimatum: stay in the fallen refuge under Dandy's tyranny or attempt to mask their oddities and assimilate in society. After the company submits to Dandy's demands, he massacres almost all of the remaining members. Symbolizing the queer experience in the 1950s and today, they must integrate and adopt conventional practices or surrender to death. It is important to acknowledge that this finale does not indoctrinate viewers or endorse the notion that conformity is the sole requisite for salvation. Rather, this season exposes and criticizes the discriminatory demands put upon marginalized citizens as well as society's destructive nature of exclusion and commodification.

After Shock

33 *American Horror Story*, a comprehensive horror anthology series, "functions in a place beyond heterocentric frames" (Doty xxii-xxiii). The show works to "illustrate and illuminate the process of forming both gay and straight sexual identities in the face of societal heteronormativity" (Chambers 17-18). It examines horror, deconstructs it, and uses it as a lens to understand alternative subjectivities. Indirectly, through various tactics – Camp, social satire, and performance just to identify a few – reclaims and displaces the terror often forced upon queer identities and meritoriously establishes a space for confrontational and critical queer discourse and cultural examination. As a subversive text, the show acknowledges that gay subjectivities are the amalgamation of queer and straight experiences – from triumphs to failures – and provide society with esteemed and constructive world perspectives.[15] It not only provides sustainable viewing pleasure for queer spectators but also a platform for contemporary televisual activism against homophobia – for queer and non-queer participants alike.

34 The show's malleable formal elements – including the adaptable casting and closed seasonal narratives – as well as its commitments to exploring and disrupting genre tenets gives its thematic content boundless occasions to subvert audiences' expectations. The show's narrative liberties afford it the chance to routinely reinvent itself. With its persistent fluxing form, *American Horror Story*'s spectatorship and audience enticement will remain erratic. As discussed, each season's atmospheric and tonal shifts as well as the casting of the show acting troupe concurrently attract and alienate viewers with the promise of ingenuity. With Season Five: *Hotel*'s advent in the Fall 2015, and with it the fundamental performer Jessica Lange's departure after four seasons at the center of the narrative and a primary attraction, the show's potential viewership is uncertain. But, the casting of pop-star Lady Gaga as the lead will undoubtedly amass a different energetic audience. This form lends itself to inclusion, and encourages media forms to find opportunities to appeal to myriad subjectivities. Within *American Horror Story*'s arena for assorted spectators, marginalize experiences – including those of queer individuals – are not only affirmed but can consume and celebrate television with other communities on the fringe.

[15] In his article "The Cinema of Camp", Babuscio writes, "Those who malign or reject the existence of a gay sensibility will too often overlook the fact that the feelings and creative productions of artists, gay or straight, are the sum total of their experiences" (132-133).

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