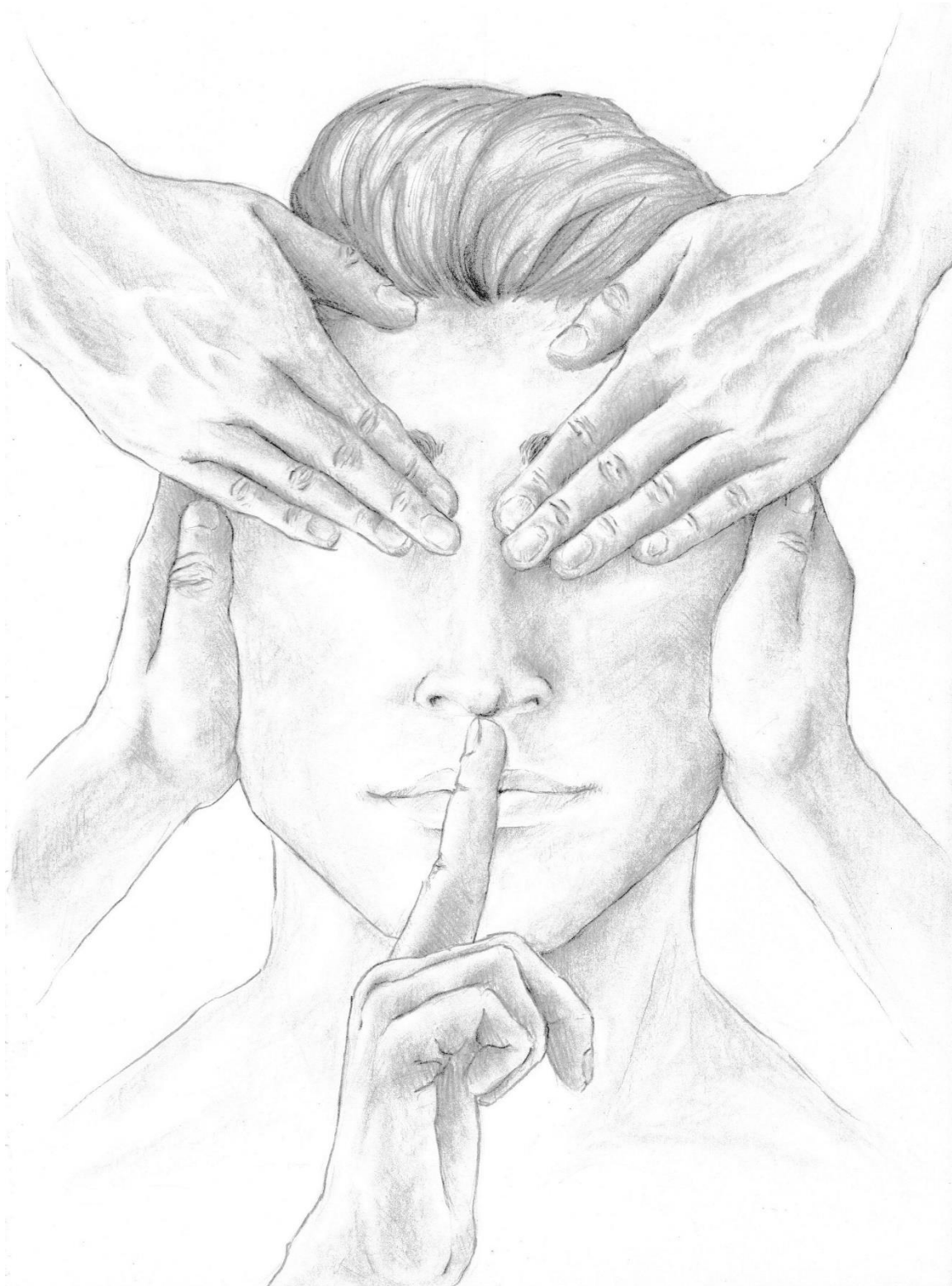


# DIGRESSIONS

Amsterdam Journal of Critical Theory,  
Cultural Analysis, and Creative Writing

Volume 4, Issue 2 (2020)



# DIGRESSIONS | Amsterdam Journal of Critical Theory, Cultural Analysis, and Creative Writing

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### **About the journal**

*Digressions: Amsterdam Journal of Critical Theory, Cultural Analysis, and Creating Writing* is a student-edited academic journal based at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. We publish articles on critical theory and cultural analysis; reviews of books, films, and art exhibitions; and creative writing. This way, we aim to provide a platform for talented master's, research master's, and Ph.D. students as well as recent graduates to share their research and writing.

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### **ISSN**

2468-3779

Cover art by Rebecca Caspers (2020)

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# Neoliberal Eugenics in Joss Whedon's *Dollhouse* (2009-2010)

LESLEY VERBEEK\*

*Abstract: In this paper, Joss Whedon's science fiction series Dollhouse (2009-2010) is argued to contain an implicit exploration of the taboo around "neoliberal eugenics," afforded by its genre-specific use of speculative technologies, and to therefore serve as a reflection of and addition to public discourse concerning the ethical dangers of free market genetic modification. This is done by drawing parallels, through discourse analysis, between themes and events in the series and arguments from prominent bioethicists and philosophers in widely read newspapers.*

*Keywords: neoliberal eugenics, Dollhouse, genetic modification, bioethics, science fiction*

**D**ollhouse is a science fiction television series that ran from 2009 until 2010, when it was cancelled due to low ratings. It was created by Joss Whedon, known for creating the cult television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), the cult hit *Firefly* (2002-2003), the *Avengers* franchise (2012 and 2015), and *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* (2013-2020). *Dollhouse* is the name of a Los Angeles based corporation that remains hidden from the public as it deals in ethically questionable and illegal practices. The corporation employs people on a five-year contract during which they are hired out to rich individuals. During those five years, these employees are the property of Dollhouse, which uses sophisticated neural technology to wipe their memories, personalities, and skills, after which they enter the oblivious Doll state and are given names according to the NATO phonetic alphabet to strip them of their individuality and to objectify them. In this empty state, they can be imprinted with specific sets of memories, personality traits, and skills, from a large database, to create the perfect person for the job they are hired for – ranging from the perfect girlfriend to the perfect negotiator for a kidnapping.

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Once the five-year contract is up, each employee's original name and personhood, which has been stored on a hard drive, is returned to them. They then receive enough money to last a lifetime and any emotional conditions that they were dealing with in their pre-Dollhouse life, such as PTSD or grief, are permanently removed.

The two seasons of the series revolve around Echo, a Doll whose behaviour appears to be different from the others, leading to situations unforeseen by her employers. She ultimately leads a group of rebels towards the destruction of Dollhouse and its parent company Rossum, operating first from within Dollhouse, then against the backdrop of a chaotic, anarchic world in which the wiping/imprinting technology has become rampant. Whedon is known for working with themes like feminism, identity, morality, and philosophy, and these themes are also found in *Dollhouse*, as well as trans- and posthumanism (cf. Sherry Ginn's 2014 book *Joss Whedon's Dollhouse: Confounding Purpose, Confusing Identity*). However, there also seems to be a more implicit thematic exploration in the series: that of the taboo around a new form of eugenics, or what can be termed "neoliberal eugenics" in reference to free market involvement and limited government interference in the development of genetic modification. This engagement with "neoliberal eugenics" reflects a wider public discourse on the topic, which has been addressed in articles by several prominent philosophers and bioethicists, including Michael J. Sandel, who served on the United States' President's Council of Bioethics during the George W. Bush presidency, and Marcy Darnovsky, head of the Center for Genetics & Society, in a number of widely read periodicals and newspapers such as *The Atlantic*, *LA Times*, and *The New York Times*.

My aim in this paper is, through discourse analysis, to analytically compare several of such newspaper articles as a source of widely available public discourse that engages with the topic of "neoliberal eugenics" and to relate this to several key scenes or episodes in *Dollhouse*. In doing so, I intend to argue that *Dollhouse* can be read as implicitly reflecting on and adding to the discourse on "neoliberal eugenics" via the affordances of science fiction as a genre which can exaggerate current trends and turn them into subjects for moral appraisal.

### **Neoliberal eugenics**

The term "liberal eugenics" was coined by professor of ethics Nicholas Agar in 1998 in an eponymously titled article published in *Public Affairs Quarterly*. With this term he aims to separate genetic modification under liberalism from the fascist idealism primarily associated with the Nazi regime in World War II. Agar argues that "the distinguishing mark of the new liberal eugenics is state neutrality" (137), or in other

words, liberal eugenics is not a state-issued tool of violence to be applied to all who are deemed “unfit” or “undesirable,” but rather a technological possibility that is part of the free market and therefore up for individual consumer choice – it is up to parents to decide what is best for their children, using genetic modification in a similar manner as the modification of “environmental factors such as schooling or diet” (139). Agar does acknowledge that “[a]n often raised worry is that a market driven eugenics will end up meeting the needs of wealthy prospective parents whilst ignoring those of poorer prospective parents,” and therefore argues that “[w]e may intervene in the market in human improvements to extend access to prospective parents belonging to poorer sections of society” (143). However, for Agar, the emphasis on individual freedom of choice within the liberal ideology of the free market protects individuals from authoritarianism, as it prevents the state from being directly involved in the control over genetics, which was the case in “old” eugenics.

In *Can We Cure Genetic Diseases without Slipping into Eugenics?* (2018), eugenics historian Nathaniel Comfort expresses scepticism towards the kind of free market liberalism espoused by Agar and argues that “[l]iberal eugenics is really neoliberal eugenics” (183). By replacing liberal with neoliberal, Comfort explicitly addresses the shape liberalism has taken in many Western societies over the last four decades and questions what “individual freedom of choice” really means.

In *Neo-Liberal Ideology* (2008), Rachel Turner establishes the four cornerstones of the neoliberal ideology as revolving around the market, welfare, the constitution, and property (13). All four aspects are ultimately tied to ideals about a strong and efficient economy that would reduce the size of state control and subsequently promote individual freedom. A free market society, Turner argues, is “the most productive and efficient economic order” for neoliberals because, “[l]ike Darwinian natural selection, competition in the market order acts to eliminate negative inefficiency by selecting out winners by their profit achievement and eliminating inefficient loss-makers” (124). Additionally, “[t]he rationale behind privatisation was to expose state-owned enterprises to the full rigours of competition and to restore the central role of the market in the allocation of resources” – it would “reduce the size and scope of state control” and “increase individual freedom through the expansion of consumer choice” (131). Similarly, private property is portrayed as “the most fundamental of civil liberties” and acts against the “totalitarian oppression” of property encroachment (192). The welfare state is furthermore seen as infringing “the freedom of the individual” and leading to “economic inefficiency and ineffectiveness” (163). The constitution, finally, “represents a means through which the powers of government and other state

officials can be curtailed" (167). Turner however, argues that the neoliberal ideology plays out differently in practice. For instance, she argues that although neoliberals define the market as self-generating and separate from politics / the state, it actually "does not exist in isolation" (136) but rather needs politics, because "national strong state capacities and participatory democracy are essential ingredients for the preservation of a global market society" (137). In *Economics: The User's Guide* (2014), Ha-Joon Chang furthermore states that neoliberalism, which "has been the dominant economic view since the 1980s," is "very close to, but not quite the same as, classical liberalism": whereas classical liberals opposed democracy, as they believed that for instance women and poor people should not have the right to vote, neoliberals "do not openly oppose democracy" but "many of them are willing to sacrifice democracy for the sake of private property and the free market" (36).

It is these driving forces behind neoliberalism that lead Comfort to argue that there cannot be freedom of choice in such a system. Neoliberalism subverts the liberal ideology of individual choices and rights into individual pressures and expectations in order to maintain the free market and centralize profit as the system's main goal. As such it risks trivializing or ignoring factors such as privilege and discrimination, and the social barriers that may lead to certain people being excluded from market participation and the accompanying benefits. Therefore, in practice, neoliberal principles lead to increased inequality and a revival of the exclusionary spirit of classical liberalism. This subversion means that an incongruity exists between the neoliberal ideology of freedom and its practical consequences. According to Comfort, subjecting genetic modification to the free market will therefore not protect consumers from authoritarianism, as was argued by Agar, but will rather ensure that parents will want to choose those traits that will make their children successful, in other words, those traits "that society privileges" – or in other, cruder words still, those traits that will lead to "the same tired old Aryan master race" in the shape of "tall, white, straight, handsome [men]" (Comfort 183) (in addition I would mention 'non-disabled') – all *under the guise of* individual consumer choice. According to Comfort, then, the emphasis on individual choice does not protect individuals, but rather protects the system (i.e. free market capitalism) from individual contingencies (e.g. any individual qualities, illnesses, or disabilities that supposedly do not fit in a productive society). The term neoliberal, rather than liberal, helps to express concerns about the subversion of free market genetic modification into something that resembles old eugenics, only this time not because of an explicit view on racial superiority and inferiority, but because of an implicit, (semi-)hidden structure that still prefers a certain type of body and mind

that has been at the centre of liberal humanism for centuries and that is associated with intelligence and productivity – and therefore most suitable to survive in a hard-working, money-churning society. What such a structure does is enforce the idea that individuals should change according to standards produced by the interaction between the market and society, rather than the other way around, and thus, as Comfort argues, the (implicit) societal pressures that lead to “freely chosen” genetic modification (e.g. capitalism’s pressures on productivity) “point toward the same outcomes as authoritarian collectivism: a genetically stratified society resistant to social change – one that places the blame for society’s ills on individuals rather than corporations or the government” (Comfort 185) – meaning that genetically enhanced human beings will gain a new type of privilege over those who, for whatever reason, do not have access to or do not want to use genetic modification. Ultimately, what such developments might lead to are new class divisions in addition to the loss of individual agency under the guise of consumer choice: neoliberal free market ideology may present the consumption of goods and services as up for individual freedom of choice, while in reality there are societal pressures behind these choices, or barriers such as discrimination or a lack of accessibility. Precisely because of the emphasis on individual freedom of choice that pushes people to “choose” whatever fits best into the system, a neoliberal system can be maintained that is geared towards maximum productivity and that is resistant to social change.

### **Newspaper discourse and *Dollhouse***

Even if they do not utilize the academically established term “neoliberal eugenics,” many articles in newspapers present similar arguments against notions of human enhancement, and thus such arguments have been in the public eye for decades. For practical reasons I will focus on twenty-first-century articles – not only because *Dollhouse* is a twenty-first-century cultural product, but also because of two specific new developments: Inheritable Genetic Modification (IGM) and the CRISPR-Cas9 technique, successfully applied in 2001 and 2013 respectively. Both of these developments are aimed at altering the germline and therefore have the pragmatic potential to let parents decide their offspring’s physical and intellectual characteristics. In the following sections, I aim to present two distinct parallels between public newspaper discourse on the taboo of neoliberal eugenics and themes in *Dollhouse*, using key scenes or episodes, while also referring to the overall course of the narrative. First I will explore the ethics of (commercial) enhancement and the fear of resulting class divisions, after which I will shift my



focus to the contingencies that arise from new technologies and their possible implications.

### **The ethics of (commercial) enhancement and (corporate) control**

According to ethicist Mark S. Frankel in his 2003 article *Inheritable Genetic Modification and a Brave New World*, published in *The Hastings Center Report*, IGM offers “the promise that genes associated with characteristics found to be undesirable (or less desirable) could be replaced by those linked to desired traits” (33). It is in response to such ideas around genetic (un)desirability that parallels have been drawn between genetic modification and eugenics, not only in academic literature, but also in journalism. In a 2003 *The New York Times* article called *The New Eugenics*, for example, Nicolas Kristof writes that “[m]any disability activists argue that we’re moving toward a new eugenics, and I’m afraid that they could be right” because “[a]s even proponents acknowledge, the line [in genetic engineering] between repair and enhancement is too murky to be meaningful” (n.p.). It is worth noting that around this time there were already websites for fertility clinics where couples could select preferable characteristics regarding height, hair colour, and even IQ (Frankel and Chapman 1303). Discussing his 2002 book *The Case Against Perfection* in a 2004 article in *The Atlantic*, political philosopher Michael J. Sandel states that “the deeper danger [of human genetic modification] is that [it represents] a kind of hyperagency – a Promethean aspiration to remake nature, including human nature, to serve our purposes and satisfy our desires” (n.p.) (which is essentially Dollhouse’s sales pitch). Sandel adds that

[i]t is commonly said that genetic enhancements undermine our humanity by threatening our capacity to act freely, to succeed by our own efforts, and to consider ourselves responsible – worthy of praise or blame – for the things we do and for the way we are. It is one thing to hit seventy home runs as the result of disciplined training and effort, and something else, something less, to hit them with the help of steroids or genetically enhanced muscles (n.p.).

Lining up Sandel’s views with neoliberal eugenics, hyperagency will belong to those institutions that decide what genetic modification ought to be used for (e.g. capitalist endeavours, turning genetic modification into genetic *commodification*), while it undermines the (sense of) agency of those whom genetic modification is imposed upon. According to evolutionary biologist Lynn Margulis, as quoted in

Mark Baard's 2003 Wired article *Will Genetic Engineering Kill Us?*, "[i]f humans create an offshoot of their own species (...) that act would represent a dramatic turning point in the evolution of homo sapiens. Such a split would necessarily mark the end of our species..." (n.p.). A college professor in the episode "Man On The Street" speculates that if the technology Dollhouse is secretly using actually exists and is abused to program people according to somebody else's whim, "we will be over. As a species, we will cease to matter." Whether implicitly or explicitly stated, in such discussions exists the notion that the possibility of genetic modification, used in a manner that serves another's purpose, could potentially result in an alteration of both power dynamics and our perception of what it means to be a (useful, productive, good, perfect) human being, which might indeed turn into what Comfort fears and come to inspire ideas about superiority and inferiority.

One scene from *Dollhouse's* episode "Omega" in particular deals both with the notion of a "superior race" and with the loss of individuality and individual agency suggested by debates around "neoliberal eugenics." Alpha, a Doll who, due to a severe technical problem, turned violent and out of control, imprints Echo with thirty-eight personalities to make her into what he calls an "ascended being" and argues that this is what makes them both divine:

Echo [in disgust]: "You think we're gods?"

Alpha: "We're not just humans anymore. We're not multiple personalities, we're many personalities." [...]

Echo: "We're not gods."

Alpha: "Fine! Übermensch. Nietzsche predicted our rise. Perfected. Objective. Something new."

Echo [sarcastically]: "Right. New, superior people. With a little German thrown in, what could possibly go wrong? We're not new. We're not anything. We're not anybody, because we're everybody. I mean, I get it. I understand it. I'm experiencing like thirty-eight of them right now. But I somehow understand, that not one of them is me. I can slip into one. Actually, it slips into me. They had to make room for it. They hollowed me out. There's no me, I'm just a container."

Alpha believes that when human beings have complete control over their own personalities (or "when we have full control over human genetics"), they become superior. Echo however, states that "they," Dollhouse, hollowed her out, and that personalities "slip into her" instead of the other way around. This change from the

active voice to the passive voice is important, because it highlights the loss of individual agency experienced by Echo as she finds herself controlled by another entity, which uses her as a “container” to be filled with whatever they deem fit for their own purposes. Echo is made to fulfil *somebody else’s goals*, and she realizes that she is not, unlike what Alpha suggests, in control of herself, but rather acting to fulfil Dollhouse’s commercial goals.

Concerns regarding the implications of the commercialism that is at the heart of neoliberal eugenics are found in a number of articles. As reported by the *LA Times* for instance, in the 2001 article *Will Companies Hold Control of Life Made in a Petri Dish?*, economist Jeremy Rifkin argues that “[s]tem cell research brings us face to face with the prospect of fashioning a commercially driven eugenics society in the 21st century” and that “[w]e are on the cusp of a commercial Eugenics Era.” (n.p.). In her 2000 article *A Genetic Future Both Tantalizing and Disturbing: A Small Leap to Designer Babies*, *The New York Times* journalist Sheryl Gay Stolberg writes: “[i]n the last century, eugenics was about the exercise of power and ideology. In the next, it may be about money” (n.p.). Stolberg furthermore quotes molecular geneticist Dr. Lee M. Silver, who argues that the problem with commercialism and the free market is that “it is people with money who will be able to not only give their child a better environment, but also better genes” (n.p.). Beard adds the following to the conversation:

Bioethicists and scientists are contemplating the future fear that genetic engineering and other technologies are going to divide human beings into classes that may one day try to destroy one another. Rich, powerful people will use technology to make their kids smarter, they say. The poor and the disenfranchised, meanwhile, will become a kind of subhuman servant class (n.p.).

In a 2016 *NPR* article by journalist Rob Stein called *Breaking Taboo*, head of the Center for Genetics & Society Marcy Darnovsky is quoted as follows:

If we’re going to be producing genetically modified babies, we are all too likely to find ourselves in a world where those babies are perceived to be biologically superior. And then we’re in a world of genetic haves and have-nots. (...) That could lead to all sorts of social disasters. It’s not a world I want to live in (n.p.).

In essence, the creation of an enhanced class is similar to what Alpha has in mind. His own ideas do not involve commerce, nor are they specifically about *dividing* people; they are about creating an entirely new species of human beings by enhancing the *whole* of humanity, while killing those who are in the way. The scene from *Dollhouse* quoted above in that sense resembles old eugenics more literally and directly than it does neoliberal eugenics. However, Alpha is able to *subvert* a type of technology that (viewers are led to believe) has been created purely for commercial ends: to garner profit for Dollhouse. Up until the final episodes of the series there is no reason to believe that the technology has been created for a different reason, as it is very clear that many people profit financially and are mainly concerned with the profitability of the Dolls. As is revealed in one of the final episodes, however, as one of the series' many plot-twists, the wiping/imprinting technology was initially developed by Dollhouse's parent company, Rossum, in order to exercise political control by replacing government officials with Dolls. Such a display of a corporation's ulterior motives can be read to criticize neoliberal capitalism to an extreme extent: it seems to say that large corporations have the inherent ability to subvert the free market ideology (and thereby that the free market inherently affords subversion) by creating power through acquired wealth and that neoliberal capitalism will inevitably lead to corrupt power dynamics. As Comfort states: "elites justify increasing inequality with a libertarian rhetoric of individual freedom" (182). Comfort and the bioethicists quoted above do not view commercialism and free-choice consumerism as part of an ideal liberal free market that protects us from authoritarianism or class divisions and inequality, but rather point out the inherent possibility of the subversion of the free market ideology that can lead to "new" or neoliberal eugenics. These ideas are supported by *Dollhouse's* narrative, which shows a two-way subversion: one that explicitly leads to "old" eugenics because the technology falls into the wrong hands, and one that leads to neoliberal eugenics because a large company tries to establish authoritarian power over people's behaviour, while pretending that there is merely a commercial goal and that they are operating under the free market values of demand and answer, albeit in secret. According to *Dollhouse's* final episodes, such a system, in Marxist fashion, will collapse under its own contradictions, in this case into anarchy.

To address in more detail the question of whether it is possible to maintain individual agency and act on free choice under neoliberalism, we can look at one episode in particular that grapples with the relation between agency and the power of wealth. The episode, fittingly titled "Belonging," shows us that one of the main characters, Priya, was placed inside Dollhouse because she rejected a powerful, rich art collector (Nolan). This is also one of the episodes that challenges the extent to

which the five-year contract is signed voluntarily. Other examples include Echo herself, who in her pre-Doll life as Caroline is unable to live with herself after a mistake on her part that left someone seriously injured, and Anthony, Victor in his Doll state, who in his pre-Doll life left the army with PTSD and is unable to process this. They both consider Dollhouse to be their only hope and are driven there because the company possesses the technology to remove memories and mental health conditions. In Priya's case, she is forcibly "admitted" to Dollhouse by a man who happens to have the wealth and connections to pull a few strings. In Dollhouse she becomes Sierra and is consequently programmed, at Nolan's request, to display behaviour that is more "desirable" in his eyes (i.e. being submissive to him), making her commercially viable for Dollhouse, as the company can now rent out her services to him. Originally, Priya was an aspiring artist from Australia. Nolan was interested in her, but she never reciprocated; with the help of Dollhouse's parent company Rossum, he orchestrated an art gallery for her filled with Dolls who were supposed to manipulate her into wanting to be with him. The following conversation between Nolan and one of Rossum's employees, Harding, explains his sentiments towards her:

Harding: "This is an elaborate, expensive seduction, Nolan. I mean, it's the least Rossum can do after all your work with us, but couldn't we just buy her a necklace or a boat or something?"

Nolan: "I've tried all that, but she's an artist. Free spirit, Harding. She can't be bought."

Harding: "Ah. But she *can* be lured."

Nolan: "We'll see."

Harding: Why don't you let us *build* the woman you want? The perfect woman. We have all types available."

Nolan: "I don't want a Doll, Harding. I want her."

When Nolan's initial plans fail, he resorts to physical force to try and have her come home with him. Priya lashes out by saying: "You disgust me, nothing in this world could ever make me love you." The scene is immediately followed by a transition shot that shows Nolan standing in the exact same spot with the text "present day" at the bottom of the screen, while Priya, who is now an imprinted Sierra, runs over to him and kisses him. A year has passed since his humiliation at the art gallery, and since then he has orchestrated an intricate scheme that has led to Priya's forced Dollhouse admission. Being a powerful owner of a mental health clinic, he convinced his doctors to admit Priya for psychosis, for which she started to receive

medication. When her mental condition became worse and unmanageable, he “saved” her from the clinic and her own psychotic state by declaring her condition untreatable and handing her over to Dollhouse, which he presented as a last resort and as the only way Priya could finally have some peace of mind. When she became Sierra, Nolan then proceeded to hire her services so that he could finally have (his modified version of) Priya to himself. Topher, the scientist working for Dollhouse who is responsible for the Doll’s wipes and imprints, discovers that Priya “wasn’t psychotic despite her heavy medication, she was psychotic *because of it.*” When the head of Dollhouse, Adele DeWitt, finds out Nolan’s involvement, she invites him into her office to tell him his engagements with Sierra or any other Doll are permanently over. She wants nothing to do with him, calls him a rapist, and sees him as an outlier who has managed to abuse the system. However, Nolan is able to go over her head and permanently buy Sierra because of his wealth and his financial connections to Rossum. Feelings of guilt and moral duality, which are new to him as he has previously regarded Dollhouse as one big playground, motivate Topher to try and help Priya: rather than imprinting Sierra with the Priya that Nolan designed, Topher imprints her with her original personality which includes her memories of Nolan and what he did to her. When she finally confronts Nolan, he attacks her, but she is able to fight him off and kills him. Both Topher and DeWitt, with the help of another Dollhouse employee, get rid of the body and of any evidence and take Sierra back to the house, where she voluntarily returns to her Doll state to finish the contract, since she has nowhere else to go and wants to forget everything that has happened. Because Topher and DeWitt are usually portrayed as firm (and in Topher’s case mostly indifferent) advocates of Dollhouse, their disgust at Nolan’s motivations and the care they suddenly display for Sierra/Priya highlights their awareness of their position in a morally grey area. This sets in motion their doubts about the work that they do and they both end up having crucial roles in the destruction of Dollhouse and Rossum from within. What is important here though, is that they cannot act upon these doubts at first, as they are being threatened by Rossum to keep obeying their orders and continue business as usual, and with Sierra’s return to Dollhouse, everything seems to have resumed its status quo. On the surface, nothing appears to have changed.

Nolan’s treatment of Priya resembles the eugenics practice of getting rid of people who are “undesirable” because they cannot or do not want to perform in the way that those in power want them to. Additionally, Priya did “choose” to return and is now still in the possession of Dollhouse/Rossum. In that sense, this forced return to the status quo in which everybody has no choice but to resume their initial positions as employer or employee, represent what Comfort has referred to

as a (genetically) stratified society “resistant to social change” (Comfort 185) – all still under the guise of voluntary employment, voluntary contracts, and a system of demand/answer, while it is in fact the people with wealth and connections who hold the most power and can therefore strip people of their autonomy and agency. This abuse of the wiping/imprinting technology and the power that Rossum has built through it were unforeseen features to the unknowing Dollhouse employees, both to the people who signed up to become Dolls and to people like Topher and DeWitt. In fact, Rossum’s technologies regularly display contingencies, although they manifest themselves chaotically: they do not choose sides. Many times, they are to the disadvantage of our main characters – those who try to destroy Rossum – but sometimes they can be used favourably by them.

### **Technological contingencies**

In his article, Frankel comments on the issues following the inherent contingency of IGM techniques. For instance, with the successful transmission of modified DNA, “both the donated mitochondrial DNA and that of the birth mother were found in all the cells of those babies born by this method” (33) meaning that the children technically have one father and two mothers, resulting in public ethical questions. Another such unforeseen consequence was the fact that two children, one in 2002, the other in 2003, had both developed leukaemia as a result of somatic gene transfer technology. Cases like these have been reported by major newspapers such as the *LA Times* (2002), *The New York Times* (2002) and *The Washington Post* (2005), all of which acknowledged in their articles that these occurrences contributed to an already weakened faith in gene therapy. Where the events themselves discouraged people working in the field of genetics, the news coverage arguably affected its lay readers in the same way, creating an aura of distrust around gene therapy and human genetic modification among the general public. The mentioned newspapers furthermore featured people from the field addressing the fact that with new technologies, risks and unforeseeable issues are involved. The same dr. Anderson who was interviewed for Stolberg’s *New York Times* article, states, as paraphrased by the *LA Times*, that “researchers have long feared that adding a gene would cause problems, because there is no way to control where in the DNA the new gene will land” (n.p.). He is further quoted as saying that “[g]ene therapy should only be used in the treatment of serious diseases, because there are risks” (n.p.). *The New York Times* reports dr. Savio Woo, former president of the American Society of Gene Therapy, as saying, in reference to the CRISPR-Cas9 technique: “[t]his is a new enemy that we have discovered. We know that there is a theoretical possibility, but it has never been seen before” (n.p.). In Rob Stein’s *NPR*

article mentioned earlier, Marcy Darnovsky states that “[w]hen you’re editing the genes of human embryos, that means you’re changing the genes of every cell in the bodies of every offspring, every future generation of that human being (...). So these are permanent and probably irreversible changes that we just don’t know what they would mean” (n.p.).

In *Dollhouse*, most of the major plot lines rely on unforeseen technological errors or side effects, and they are the driving force that leads the narrative to its anarchic ending. Alpha’s violent disposition was a result of technological errors. Echo’s personality and motivations rely on unforeseen side effects, as she maintains a residual persona that somehow takes offense at Dollhouse’s practices. Topher states that the Dolls “shouldn’t be adaptable [to their missions], they should be predictable” (“True Believer”), but at the same time it is recognized several times throughout the series, that with new technologies, risks are involved. For example, DeWitt argues almost verbatim to the quotes above that “science is seldom exact, there are risks,” after a mission almost fails due to errors in the imprinting technology. These risks however, do not stop Dollhouse from operating; monetary gains still hold priority over absolute safety. Other times, contingencies can be sought out and subverted: Echo’s residual persona, while first being a reason for concern for Dollhouse, is ultimately protected and recognized by Topher and DeWitt as a means to rebel.

“The Attic,” too, is subverted in its use; this is a neurological space invented by Rossum in cooperation with Dollhouse to store defective Dolls who can no longer be used for monetary gain. Once again, the Attic, along with the Nolan/Priya story arc mirrors the practice of eugenics – or, in the equivalent of neoliberal eugenics, it mirrors getting rid of people who are unfit to fully participate in the free market economy. Dolls in the Attic are kept in suspended and connected consciousness. With Rossum believing that DeWitt is still loyal to them, DeWitt is able to pretend to banish Echo to the Attic, who in turn can infiltrate this “hive-mind” so that she can wake up its victims. Ultimately, Echo and her fellow rebels bring down Rossum, but not after the wiping/imprinting technology has been hacked, stolen, and turned into a mechanism to remote control human beings, all through unforeseen flaws in the security system and within the technology itself. Arguably, then, new technologies are neither essentially good nor evil, but, as was already said, can be *chaotic*, and it is ultimately what is done with them that can help determine how their consequences manifest themselves. In line with the arguments presented in the articles mentioned above, there is simply no way of exactly predicting the future of new technological developments. That is why they need to be examined carefully, not just in terms of whether they work as intended



or not, but also in terms of the potential they carry for societal impact: in what ways can they be utilized by those in power? How will they change the ways we regard ourselves, others, and the society we live in?

## **Conclusion**

*Dollhouse* can be read to argue that the taboo around genetic modification, in light of neoliberal eugenics, is justified. It does so by being critical of Dollhouse's practices and by revealing that its parent company Rossum has ulterior motives. First presented by Adele DeWitt as merely a service that answers a demand representing the free market, Rossum's wiping/imprinting technology shows what corporate control and the subversion of the free market and consumer choice ideology can mean. On an individual level it shows the loss of autonomy over one's own body. This includes both Echo's and Priya's story but ultimately also *all* people who come to work for Dollhouse. They are essentially lured there under the guise of free choice, but most of them feel that, because of their own personal circumstances, they have no other option. There is no place for them in society, which apparently lacks proper support, and forces them to rent out their bodies to a company that modifies them so that they can forget and be productive again. In line with what Frankel says about the dangers of IGM, this system removes what are deemed to be undesirable traits that threaten normalcy and productivity and replaces them with desirable ones, rather than replacing undesirable aspects of society itself (e.g. social barriers and the lack of a safety net).

On a larger scale the narrative progression of *Dollhouse* demonstrates that neoliberalism inherently allows for the subversion of technologies under the free market ideology. This is exemplified through Alpha's desire for a superior race and Rossum's desire for authoritarian power and control over the individual's behaviour, which the company hides behind a façade of demand and answer, or as their initial spokeswoman and advocate Adele DeWitt puts it, of "giving people [i.e. rich costumers/consumers] what they want." According to Comfort, such corruptible free market and free choice ideologies can lead to stratification through unequal access to genetic modification technologies or the unwillingness to use them, and resistance to social change because they hide societal pressures to choose whatever will benefit the neoliberal system.

The final episodes of *Dollhouse* show the unsustainability of a neoliberal system that allows for such corruption and the abuse of power. The narrative's events culminate in the onset of Rossum's explicit corporate control as opposed to their initial implicit secret operations away from the public eye. This control evokes

the fierce resistance of groups that band together to fight the corporation, leading to Rossum's collapse and eventually to an uncontrolled, lawless space of anarchy.

Ultimately, the show's overall developments can be seen as reflecting the fears of the commodification of human beings through neoliberal eugenics. What happens when genetic modification becomes commercialized and subject to free market forces? Are consumers really able to choose freely under neoliberal capitalism or is there an ulterior motive hidden behind this ideology – a motive that seeks to create highly productive and non-agential members of society in order to maximize profit and power? Such dangers of corporate control and the unbridled progress in technological developments are captured in *Dollhouse* through its science fictional exaggeration of current societal trends. At the same time, the series adds to the ethical discourse around genetic modification by showing its audience what could happen should the taboo of genetic modification be broken: if the technology is installed in society as a commercialized and normalized practice, we first have neoliberal eugenics to fear, and then revolution and anarchy to look forward to.

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# Temporal Transportation in the Anthropocene Novel

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*Abstract: The Anthropocene is a geological age defined by humankind's rapid and accelerating effect on the earth's environs. Literature written in and about the Anthropocene must take into consideration the issue of scale: planetary changes and distress happen on a level far beyond the scope of an individual's capacity to process that change. Russian formalists were the first to identify how stories contend with temporal and spatial distortion through narrative techniques; the following analysis of two pieces of Anthropocene literature, Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods* (2008) and Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013), identifies how these techniques – fabula and sjuzet – make the incomprehensibility of vast time and space immediate for the reader. It is incontestable that “narrative is, indeed, magical in the ways that it can performatively enact new ways of being” (Lovell n.p.) – and the novel is an ideal form for transcending time and space in the age of the Anthropocene.*

*Keywords: Anthropocene, fabula, postmodernism, narratology, temporality*

## **T**emporal transportation in the Anthropocene novel

Ursula Heise, in *From the Blue Planet to Google Earth*, argues that in the Anthropocene – the new geological era, brought about by human impact on our planet – construction of “place” is complicated by scale. The problem, she states, is “how we might be able to develop cultural forms of identity and belonging that are commensurate with the rapid growth in political, economic, and social interconnectedness that has characterized the last few decades” (n.p.). The temporal and spatial scale of the geological force that humankind has on earth makes it difficult to conceptualize our own individual part in that force. As Timothy

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† Thank you to dr. K. Steenbergh and dr. R. van den Oever for your support and guidance. Thank you to ZMJ; my very first and very best editor.

Clark notes, "in daily life we lack any immediate sense of the Earth as a finite planet. Environmental damage happening at that scale remains usually counter-intuitive and even invisible" (22).

To be sure, this scaling problem offers a challenge to Anthropocene literature that attempts to forge connections between the narrative and the reader's sense of planetary distress. There are obvious "narrative and imaginative limitations [...] posed by the spatial and temporal scale of some of the processes that mark the Anthropocene" (Von Mossner 83). How, then, can we make the scale of the Anthropocene perceivable? Or, as Adam Trexler asks in *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change*: "What tropes are necessary to comprehend climate change or to articulate the possible futures faced by humanity? How can a global process, spanning millennia, be made comprehensible to human imagination, with its limited sense of place and time?" (5). Can literature – can a novel – construct a narrative that helps resolve the scale issues of place and planetary belonging in the Anthropocene?

By examining two Anthropocene-centric novels – Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods* (2007) and Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013) – it becomes clear that narrative shifts in the temporal dimension and non-linear, postmodern representations of time in literature can address these spatial and scale problems. Following an essential theoretical overview of narrative techniques that allow stories to transcend space and time, a close reading of these narrative strategies in *The Stone Gods* and *A Tale for the Time Being* will demonstrate how both authors construct worlds in which temporality and a character's place in time are key elements in the plot, and shows how the novel, as a form, is able to tackle the problems posed by concepts of scale in relation to place.

### **Issues of scale**

One of the primary concerns of conceptualizing the Anthropocene is that we as a species are acting as a geological force, but, as Dipesh Chakrabarty states in "The Climate of History: Four Theses," "we humans never experience ourselves as a species. We can only intellectually comprehend or infer the existence of the human species but never experience it as such [...] one never experiences being a concept" (220). Similarly, one cannot experience the effects of the anthropogenic force of our species; climate change, for instance, cannot be felt or experienced as such, because its scale, on a planetary level, extends far beyond the realm of human understanding. Climate change is what Timothy Morton calls a "hyperobject" – an object so large in scale that it defies human comprehension, leaving us unable to grasp the scope of our effect on the planet. We are unable to place ourselves within

the machination of the Anthropocene because of the sheer size of that machination.

It is not only the size of the problem that transcends human imagination; it is also the temporal scale. Rob Nixon has called humanity's long-term effects on the planet "slow violence," stating that "maintaining a [...] focus on slow violence poses acute challenges, not only because it is spectacle deficient, but also because the fallout's impact [...] may stretch beyond the horizon of imaginable time" (47). This temporal dimension of the Anthropocene again makes it difficult to conceptualize planetary distress caused by human actions. As Nixon notes, it is a "temporal question [...] how do you dramatize the costs of uneven development when their delayed effects are intimate but their genesis is far-off in time?" (52).

In "Imagining Geological Agency: Storytelling in the Anthropocene," Alexa Weik Von Mossner argues that literature has the ability to effectively circumvent the problems of spatial and temporal scale. Storytelling, she argues, "can [...] help us to imaginatively experience the impact of the geophysical force that is the human" (84). It does so "through psychological activities that narratologists and psychologists of fiction call transportation and performance" (Von Mossner 84). Transportation makes use of the transformative nature of narratives to transport the reader into the story world, while performance is the reader's engagement with the text – the "act of imagining" which is "crucial to our understanding" (Von Mossner 85). Through these processes, the reader is able to actively engage with the large-scale concepts of the Anthropocene, as long as the narrative is constructed in a way that allows the text to imaginatively transport the reader. "Reading transforms the mind through processes of transportation, cognitive estrangement, strategic empathizing, and other narrative techniques" (Von Mossner 86); these techniques can be used to "scale down" the temporal scale of the Anthropocene, allowing readers to comprehend the previously incomprehensible. In other words, in order to make the scope of the Anthropocene perceivable to the reader, the author must employ techniques to zoom both "in" and "out," much like a camera, on large-scale concepts such as planet and time.

### **Narratological devices: "Time told differently"**

To examine how these transformations in temporal scale function in literary texts, it is useful to discuss the terms that narratology uses to describe time. "Russian formalists were the first to distinguish between '*fabula*' (or 'story time') and '*sjuzet*' (or 'narrative time')," according to Theodore Martin's "Temporality and Literary Theory." Story time is the chronologically ordered events of the story, while in narrative time, those same events are rearranged, expanded, or contracted by the

narrative. Martin draws on Gérard Genette's *Narrative Discourse* to define the concepts of "order, duration, and frequency" in narrative texts, describing how to understand the relation between story time and narrative time. Order "refers to the relation between the order of events in the story and the alternate order those same events are given in the narrative. Differences in order produce "narrative anachronies," allowing the narrative to exercise "temporal autonomy – that is, for a vision of temporality that has been freed from the chronological order of both story time and lived experience" (Martin n.p.). Duration describes the ability of narratives to speed up or slow down the amount of time the events of a story actually take versus the amount of time the narrative takes to describe them. Finally, frequency can "describe the narrative temporality of repetition, which allows a narrative both to return multiple times to a single event and to condense multiple happenings of an event into a single instance of narration" (Martin n.p.). Together, these three terms – order, duration, frequency – allow for an analysis of the ability of narratives to play with the concept of time, a "temporal distortion" through narrative techniques.

Martin goes on to describe different categories of time, including modern time, non-modern time, national time, and natural time – discussing deep time and the geological timescale of the Anthropocene, the "complex temporalities of the planet and the climate" that underpin the "formal and representation dilemmas posed by climatological time" previously discussed. Of particular interest to Anthropocene literature, however, is the concept of postmodern time, which can be seen as "challenging a more traditional experience of temporal continuity" (n.p.). Martin cites Ursula Heise's *Chronoschisms*, wherein she states that the "multiple alternative temporalities that structure postmodern novels force readers to reflect on the ways that time is scientifically and technologically determined in the postmodern present – and to think beyond those forms of determination in order to imagine what it might look like for time to be told differently" (n.p.). It is this different formation of time – time told differently – which transcends the difficulties of scale in Anthropocene literature, and which will be examined in closer detail in regards to Winterson's and Ozeki's texts.

It is also useful to turn to Mikhail Bakhtin, who, in "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes toward a Historical Poetics," first coined the term "chronotope," or "literally 'time space'" (15) to describe how conceptions of time and space are represented in narratives, and how this concept is essential to the very idea of narrative. For Bakhtin, the essential point of representations of time and space was the "*representational* importance of the chronotope" (22) – that is, that narratives can allow "time [...] [to] become, in effect, palpable and visible" (22).

This is an essential part of what Anthropocene literature must do; it must overcome problems of representation to allow the large-scale concepts of time and space in relation to human planetary effect to become palpable. Bakhtin notes that “all the novel's abstract elements – philosophical and social generalizations, ideas, analyses of cause and effect – gravitate toward the chronotope and through it take on flesh and blood” (22). It is not enough for Anthropocene literature to simply state facts of planetary distress and climate change; it does not resonate with the reader, leaves no lasting effect, falls short of communicating its essential message. Instead, literature requires the interplay of narrative time and space – the chronotope – to “permit [...] the imaging power of art to do its work” (22). Thus, it is important and worthwhile to examine specific works of Anthropocene literature for how, exactly, they manipulate and highlight the chronotope to accomplish their essential work.

### **Repetition of destruction: *The Stone Gods***

In *The Stone Gods* (2007), Jeanette Winterson foregrounds the temporal dimension by structuring her novel in three sections that take place in three very different times – the first section, approximately 65 million years ago, on the planet Orbus; the second, on eighteenth-century Easter Island; and the third, on (presumably) planet Earth some time in our near future, “post 3-War,” after nuclear destruction has rendered parts of the planet uninhabitable. All three of these separate story worlds feature iterations of the same characters – Spike, a humanoid robot, and Billie, the protagonist. This repetition echoes the themes of planetary destruction and human carelessness across multiple timescales, allowing the reader to conceptualize the long-term effects of these thematic realities on our own planet. An emphasis is put on the ability for these themes to reoccur over vastly different times and spaces.

At multiple points, Winterson's characters voice versions of the following refrain: “a repeating world – same old story.” Although some of the details of the reiterated tale of colonization, ecological destruction, war, same-sex love, and living at the brink of the planet's carrying capacity change, the overarching trajectory of each is the same (Merola 128).

Thus, Winterson makes use of the narratological “frequency” to create the postmodern “temporal distortion” which, for the reader, implicates humanity on the species level as the cause of that ecological destruction.



In the first section, Orbus is presented as a futuristic planet, leading the reader to believe that the events of the first section take place in the far future: "To stress [the] iterative tale of destruction, Winterson deliberately misleads the reader about the temporal setting of Orbus in part one" (Mertens and Craps 147). Throughout Billie's descriptions of genetic "fixing," which allows humans to remain the same age, Robo sapiens, and self-driving solar powered vehicles, she characterizes her world through an alphabet game – and "F is for Future" (Winterson 26). The combined effect of these details is to convince the reader that the setting of the book is in the distant future, which includes scientific advancements far beyond those familiar to us. This temporal displacement is one of the key elements of the novel that causes the reader to consider human impact in the Anthropocene by "scaling" through different imagined timeframes. The novel, spread across the stars and uncertain timeframes, dates, and years, "zooms out" from the present, past, or future, and "collapses" them into one story. The effect on the reader is marked: what does it mean to consider our past as future, or the future of our own planet written in its past (Anthropocenic effects)? By emphasizing that our future could be our past, Winterson sheds new light on our current situation: "when the reader finds out that this supposed future is actually a distant past, this raises the question: what if our imagined future were our past? Through this temporal confusion, Winterson in a sense places the reader in a present beyond our present to look back on our time to see what we are doing to the planet" (Mertens and Craps 148). Winterson employs a narrative time that inverts the reader's expectations, which in turn asks the reader to consider Orbus's past as our future, defined by its path to certain destruction.

While this type of narrative flourish certainly has its precursors in science fiction, what is remarkable about Winterson's use of this perhaps slightly clichéd trope is its very focused purpose. Winterson here does not just want to trick the reader; she wants to trick the reader so that the reader can conceptualize hitherto unconsidered futures where the actions of humans *now* destroy that very future. To clarify; this is not a new trope, but it comes into new focus when the trope is employed specifically to evoke a response for an Anthropocene reader, addressing contemporary concerns about the state of our planet currently.

Destruction is echoed across temporal borders throughout the text; when Billie and the spaceship's crew head to colonize Planet Blue and leave the decimated Orbus in their wake, they discuss a third planet: Planet White. The planet is a ghost, left behind by another civilization which had pushed the planet past the brink and destroyed it completely:

We found a planet, and it was white like a shroud [...] as white and cold as death, as hot as rage. The planet is a raging death. Or it is a thing that has been killed and rages to be dead [...] A proud place this had been, one upon a time, once upon a time like the words in a fairytale (Winterson 62-63).

This whiteness, a blank depiction of destruction, is later echoed in Billie's second description of Wreck City, an area outside of her city destroyed by nuclear war: "The ugliness of the ruins – that was a shock – the ugliness of what we had built, the ugliness of how we had destroyed it, the brutal, stupid, money-soaked, drunken binge of twenty-first-century world. Whiteout. Done" (Winterson 194). Nicole Merola argues that this repetition of the whiteness motif highlights the temporal distortion in the novel:

Wreck City [...] underline[s] Winterson's use of multiple temporal and spatial scales and her logic of repetition. While technically these two locations are not yet geologic strata, the novel's looping, intra- and extratextually intertextual structure directly connects Wreck City and the dead Forest with their ghostly echoes on Planet White" (Merola 128).

Repetition frees the text from "story time," giving the novel the temporal autonomy that characterizes postmodern narratives. For Winterson, repetition is temporal distortion, simply by noting what, exactly, she chooses to repeat. These same images and motifs, pointedly repeated over moments that the reader is meant to think are distinctly separate in time and space, are intentionally repeated to make readers stop and reconsider the perhaps otherwise more fixed boundaries of temporality in traditional narratives.

Winterson also employs metatextual narrative strategies to emphasize the fluidity of the temporal boundaries of the novel. In part three, Billie discovers a manuscript while riding the subway:

*The Stone Gods*, said the title. OK, must be anthropology [...] I flicked through it. No point starting at the beginning – nobody ever does [...] I had another look. *Everything is imprinted for ever with what it once was*. Is that true? (Winterson 143-144).

This self-referential moment moves the text through multiple timescales, from the distant past of Orbus and eighteenth-century Easter Island to the Billie reading the novel itself on the tube. This moment creates a narrative anachrony for the reader (a moment of discrepancy in story-order and text-order; "hopping" through *fabula* and *sjuzet*), allowing the text itself to drive the story. This is a classical postmodern meta-move on Winterson's part; the existence of the book in the reader's hands creates the book on the subway seat, which again implicates the real world in a "fiction." The presence of the same book the reader is then holding in the narrative disrupts the concept of time and place; without Billie picking up the same story being read, there is no story at all. The narrative is thus focused on nonlinear, metaphysical timescales, and Winterson here employs metafiction to highlight this nonlinearity. As Adam Trexler notes, "climate fiction has increasingly allowed nonhuman things to shape narrative. The best Anthropocene novels are not solely 'character-driven'" (26). Here, in this moment, the character of Billie is secondary to the narrative, and, by extension, secondary to the real-life implications of Anthropocene concerns. Winterson continually uses metatextual elements and multiple timescales to drive the narrative, which comes to a point when Billie and Spike of part three discover a signal that appears to have been sent by the Billie and Spike of part one:

Wherever it's coming from, it's been set like an echo [...] Billie, I think it is something very strange, very old, and at the same time in front of us (Winterson 222).

By inverting time in this moment, Winterson again uses the logic of repetition and echoes to take the reader out of story time and stress the ability of narrative time to collapse timescales in Anthropocene literature. As discussed, temporality is one of the large-scale issues that Anthropocene literature must contend with; but, as Winterson recognizes, narratives have the ability to bend temporality in a way that a new message – both small and incomprehensibly large – can be communicated. The entire novel is built around a concept of inverted narrative time, which addresses problematic temporality in a satisfactory way, so that the narrative structure of *The Stone Gods* transcends spatial and temporal boundaries, allowing the reader to comprehend the large-scale concepts of planetary destruction echoed across multiple, repeating timelines.

### **Temporal entanglement: *A Tale for the Time Being***

*A Tale for the Time Being* (2013) by Ruth Ozeki is a different kind of Anthropocene literature; although it takes place entirely on planet Earth, it still makes use of flexible narrative time in order to circumvent the limits of spatial and temporal scale. It tells the story of Ruth, a writer living on a remote island in Canada, who discovers a diary washed up on the beach. The diary is written by Nao, a sixteen-year-old Japanese girl. The novel begins with Nao:

My name is Nao, and I am a time being [...] A time being is someone who lives in time, and that means you, and me, and every one of us who is, or was, or ever will be [...] by the time you read this, everything will be different, and you will be nowhere in particular, flipping idly through the pages of this book (Ozeki 3).

From the very beginning, then, Ozeki foregrounds time, asking the reader to consider multiple timescales while engaging with the text. Ruth, reading the diary, decides to match her time with Nao's:

How do you search for lost time, anyway? As she thought about this question, it occurred to her that perhaps a clue lay in the pacing. Nao had written her diary in real time, living her days, moment by moment. Perhaps if Ruth paced herself by slowing down and not reading faster than the girl had written, she could more closely replicate Nao's experience (Ozeki 38).

This, of course, necessitates that the reader pace their engagement with the text to match both Nao's writing and Ruth's reading of the diary. Rocio Davis notes that the layers of the text blend "narrative voices," which in turn "foregrounds the relationship between and among writers and their readers" (87). By structuring the novel in this way, Ozeki plays with narrative time, allowing Nao to "speak" to Ruth – and the reader – across spatial and temporal boundaries. Sue Lovell argues that this challenges the reader's perception of their own place in time and space:

Ruth and Nao's stories are [...] temporally dislocated because Nao's story of the writing of the diary occurs before Ruth's story of finding it [...] This feature and the positioning of empirical readers are vital narrative strategies for creating receptivity to the idea of porous

boundaries between these story worlds, so there is a challenge to the sole reality of the original *actual* world (Lovell n.p.).

Thus, a reader of the novel might step back from considering Ruth's and Nao's respective places in time and planet to ask themselves – what is *my* place in the Anthropocene?

Ruth quickly becomes obsessed with finding Nao and discovering how the diary reached her shores. She formulates a hypothesis that the lunchbox containing the diary was carried over the ocean following the wake of the 2011 tsunami that hit Japan. In a rumination on the aftermath of that tsunami, Ozeki describes “stone markers found on hillsides, engraved with ancient warnings: Do not build your homes below this point!” The mayor of the town describes them as “the voices of our ancestors, [who] were speaking to us across time, but we didn’t listen” (114). This emphasizes the ability of a text to communicate a warning across temporal scales; the warnings, like Nao's diary, are evidence that narratives can transcend time. Books that reach us by sea years after the fact; warnings carved into stone by our ancestors; stories passed down from generation to generation – these are all evidence that narratives move through time, reach us at a point distinct from where they originated. They are also a marker of Nixon’s notion of “slow violence,” exposing “the uneven timelines and multiple speeds of environmental terror” (61). The passage goes on to describe “a tidal wave” that “collapses into tiny particles, each one containing a story ... [these images] drawn into the gyre's becalmed center, the garbage patch of history and time” (Ozeki 114). This “temporal gyre” (Ozeki 114) is representative of the shifting timescales of a story that Ozeki utilizes to displace the reader, allowing the impact of a natural disaster like the tsunami to be emotionally experienced, collapsing Nixon’s “imaginable time” into the narrative.

In her search for Nao, Ruth emails a professor whose work on suicide in Japan includes a letter from someone named Harry, who Ruth suspects may be Nao's father. While waiting for the answer to her email, she describes her impatience as “[a] temporal stuttering, an urgent lassitude, a feeling of simultaneous rushing and lagging behind” (Ozeki 227). This rushing and lagging behind may in fact mirror the experience that the reader has while engaging with Nao's story; Ozeki goes on to typographically represent this feeling:

thisis**whatt**temporalstuttering**FEELS**LIKEastutstut**STUTTER****RUS**  
**HIN G**FORWARDin**TIME** (Ozeki 228).

Then the page goes blank; a classic postmodern move. The effect is certainly distinctive and pointed, aimed at translating the feeling of time passing; this “spatial disruption visually communicates the disorienting impact of lost time, the blank pages carrying readers into an experience of the void of timelessness. Once again, Ozeki’s discursive strategies constitute readers’ experience: time stutters, and it is then suspended altogether” (Lovell n.p.). Thus, Ozeki demonstrates the ability of a narrative to mimic the reality of being in time, translating the stillness of a moment in time into a blank page. This collapsing of time is also described in an appendix on quantum mechanics:

quantum mechanics is also time being [...] entanglement: by which two particles can coordinate their properties across space and time and behave like a single system (i.e. a Zen master and his disciple; a character and her narrator) (Ozeki 409).

The entanglement between the narrative and the reader throughout the novel causes the temporal distortion defined by narratological theory, manipulating the concept of time for both the reader and Ruth.

This temporal entanglement comes to a head for Ruth when Oliver, her husband, points out that in the process of reading the diary, Ruth has lost sense of actual time. She writes to the professor that it is a matter of urgency, but as Oliver points out, “it’s not like this is happening now, right? (Ozeki 313). The diary was, in fact, written more than a decade ago, “and we know the diary’s been floating around for at least a few years longer” (Ozeki 313). Ozeki goes on to describe Ruth’s reaction to this revelation as a sort of “slippage,” pointing out that “the days got jumbled together, and entire weeks or months or even years would yield to the ebb and flow of the dream...Fiction had its own time and logic. That was its power” (Ozeki 313-314). Reading Nao’s diary has literally taken Ruth – and, by extension, the reader – out of her time, causing her to forget when, exactly, the diary may have been written. When Nao catches up with herself in the diary, Ruth turns the page to discover that it is blank, where it had previously continued to the very end of the book (notably and suitably bound inside of Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*). Ruth is visualizing Nao’s lost time: “It’s like her life just got shorter. Time is slipping away from her, page by page...” (Ozeki 343). It is not until Ruth intervenes in Nao’s story, through a dream sequence, that the diary comes to its conclusion; in this way, as Rocio Davis notes: “the writers and readers in the text [...] participate in multilayered acts of creating themselves and each other” (94). Ruth has to intervene in a story that, as Oliver pointed out, took place long ago: this is again Heise’s

postmodern “time told differently,” a narrative which requires the characters to actually move through time to construct the story. In a narrative, time can be manipulated; “where time itself is so porous, challenging ontological boundaries between worlds and expanding possible ways of being human are also expanded in ways most alluring,” narratives that play with time ask readers “to open ourselves to the probability, rather than the possibility, that narrative is, indeed, magical in the ways that it can performatively enact new ways of being” (Lovell n.p.). Without this porous time, without the inversion of narratological order, Nao’s diary could not reach its conclusion; the temporal dimension, then, becomes a key element in the novel, driving the story.

*A Tale for the Time Being* does not, perhaps, so obviously and immediately reveal itself as a piece of Anthropocene literature in the way *The Stone Gods* does. However, through a close reading, one can see that the postmodern elements of manipulated temporality in Ozeki’s novel are purposeful in their focus – and that focus is decidedly Anthropocene. While a far-off dead planet in the future is perhaps an obvious choice for imagining the long-term effects of humanity’s effect on the earth, it is more difficult – and possibly requires a more nuanced use of narrative strategy – to make readers see that their actions have an immediate destructive consequence. Ozeki’s hillside warnings and Nao’s tsunami highlight the folly of humanity as “masters” of the earth; these disasters, unfortunate and uncontrollable consequences of exponentially growing, Anthropocene-driven climate change, need a more concrete connection. Ozeki’s use of anachronistic, postmodern temporality arguably makes that connection slightly more real for the reader.

That Ozeki invokes the temporal gyre to describe this postmodern temporality is no small thing when we consider how the Anthropocene novel can make real-world connections between large-scale problems and the reader. A reader “in the know” will of course connect the temporal gyre to the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, a large vortex of trash floating in the Pacific Ocean as readers today turn the pages of *Tale for the Time Being*. Like the earth itself, or climate change, the Pacific trash vortex can be seen as a hyperobject, a stain on the planet so large that even a photograph or documentary that tries to communicate the scope of this horrible bit of “rubbish” might well fail to communicate the scale of the problem to a viewer. This is where the Anthropocene novel might shine a light on humanity’s planetary effect; while a photo of garbage floating in the ocean could evoke a flash emotional response, a novel – a temporally manipulated narrative – could, arguably, leave a more lasting “gyre” in the minds of readers than simply *showing* the Anthropocene visually.

### **Redefining temporalities in the Anthropocene**

Although *The Stone Gods* (2007) and *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013) are two very different novels, both engage with the Anthropocene through postmodern narrative techniques which manipulate order and frequency to create new, flexible temporalities. Jeanette Winterson's use of repetition across multiple times and planets creates a narrative echo, transcending time to allow the reader to conceptualize planetary disaster on its largest scale. The deliberate inversion of time asks readers to consider "how the temporality of the future" (or the distant past, as in part one) "determines the ecological crisis as a point of reference that defines the contemporary" (Parikka 138). Ruth Ozeki employs a fluid, almost magical temporality that her characters, and the reader, must contend with; without this temporal manipulation, the story itself cannot be told. As Sue Lovell notes, "both Ruth and the empirical reader are aligned across an ontological boundary as readers of Nao's diary and in their struggle to understand and attribute a truth status to it" (n.p.). The novel constructs an identity for the reader as a "time being" who, like Ruth, must navigate through Ozeki's narrative time to understand Nao's story, dictated through a diary which has moved through time and space to reach us.

What, exactly, is at stake when authors manipulate narrative forms in this way? What purpose do the narrative techniques first outlined by Russian formalists serve? When examining Anthropocene novels, the answer becomes clear – it is through postmodern manipulation of these techniques that narratives can contend with issues of comprehension that seem beyond human understanding. In relation to human effect on the climate and the planet, it is essential that fiction – perhaps all media – is able to effectively communicate these issues. What is more, doing so creatively, in an engaging way, as these two novels have done, can perhaps contribute to real change on a planetary scale. While literary texts often employ techniques like repetition, these novels demonstrate that narrative manipulation can take on a new dimension in relation to the Anthropocene – these authors employ narratological inversions not only for rhetorical flourish but for a pointed *purpose*. Natural disasters are an immediate problem; helping humanity to understand that these disasters may be a direct consequence of human action on the planet is less immediate. Repetition, temporal distortion, transportation: these narrative features can serve the specific purpose of highlighting humanity's planetary effect, making the previously unimaginable comprehensible for the reader.

By examining these two novels for evidence of temporal manipulation, noting how both authors use narrative time to shape the story, it becomes clear



that the novel does indeed have the ability to transcend the large-scale problems that come with comprehending the Anthropocene. As Von Mossner argues, “[a]ll stories about the Anthropocene keep pushing against the boundaries of what is currently imaginable” (85); they can do so by playing with order and frequency to construct a chronotope that crosses physical and temporal boundaries. It is through this non-linear, postmodern narrative temporal manipulation that the novel is able to transport the reader, through white nuclear winters, across distant dead planets, and over the formidable waves of a decade-old tsunami, allowing the full scope of the Anthropocene to be understood. In Anthropocene literature, “fictionalizing [the Anthropocene] is not about falsifying it, or making it imaginary, but rather about using narrative to heighten its reality” (Trexler 75). Different narrative modes of engagement – with postmodern time as the key concept driving the novel – allow for the reader to feel the scope of ecological disaster and conceptualize their own place and planet. Narratives can resolve issues of space and place by redefining temporal reality in the text, making the chronotopes of Anthropocene literature both identifiable and essential to raising human awareness of the Anthropocene.

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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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# Daddy Issues: On the Representation of Family Ties in Contemporary Gay Porn

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*Abstract: In the gay community the term "daddy" is used to describe attractive older men who usually follow the hegemonic ideal of masculinity, disassociating the term from its connection to family relations. When looking at high-gloss studios like men.com, the "(step)daddy genre" seems to be booming, explicitly mentioning the taboo family relations between the actors in the scene. By looking at scenes in this genre, this article demonstrates repertoires on step-relations in contemporary gay porn in order to open up the debate about the lack of taboo in the representation of family relations in gay porn. By combining a structuralist story analysis and a media content analysis, all aspects of the scenes were comparatively analyzed and these results were then grouped into repertoires. Three repertoires were distinguished: the masculine daddy-type in contrast to the feminine son, intergenerational seduction as an achievement, and the (lack of) taboo when representing sexual relations between family members.*

*Keywords: gay pornography, family relations, daddy, familydick.com, stepdaddy*

**T**he term "daddy" has found a permanent place in the gay community, the term being used as a "tribe" in most gay dating apps, meaning that it is adopted so users can self-identify into the categorial system the gay community has created for itself. While in contemporary (gay) language usage the term "daddy" is used to describe men who adhere to the hegemonic ideal of masculine beauty, in these gay dating apps the term refers to attractive, older men, usually with body hair and a financially secure position, who want to hook up with twinks or twunks, i.e. hairless, younger men ("Daddy" in Urban Dictionary). Both uses of the term disassociate it from its original meaning: a man who is the father of children ("Daddy" in Cambridge Dictionary). Developments in contemporary gay

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pornography seem to be pulling the term back to its original meaning, explicitly mentioning the family relations between the characters in a scene.

A quick search for the term "stepfather" on Pornhub.com's gay section results in 1264 hits that are listed as amateur content (claiming to be) between related men, showing that the "stepfather" genre has established a place in amateur porn. In addition to this, the front page of the most popular gay porn site, men.com, shows a page-sized add for a "three-timing stepdad" series, making it clear that the stepfather genre has found a solid place in mainstream gay porn as well. The popularity of the genre has recently even spawned a dedicated porn site for "The Hottest Taboo Family Site," as familydick.com proudly claims on the main page of their website. This uprising of the stepfather and daddy-type genre in both amateur content sites as well as popular high-gloss porn studios calls for research into the representation of family relations in gay porn. Due to word count limitations, however, this paper focuses exclusively on material created by high-gloss porn studios.

This paper demonstrates how the (sexual) relationship between stepfather and stepson characters are represented in high-gloss gay pornography. This will be done by firstly reviewing current research on the construction of the "daddy" persona in the gay community. In this part, the construction of chosen family relations in the gay community, the duality of the hegemonic masculine ideal, and the concept of porn-personas connected to the transgressive nature of taboo porn will be discussed. Secondly, I will shortly mention the corpus and methodology of this paper. Thirdly, I will analyze scenes including the illusion of sexual acts between men with family ties selected from all-round gay porn site men.com, daddy-oriented gay porn sites hotoldermale.com and pridestudios.com, and family-oriented gay porn site familydick.com, including the corresponding actor profiles, in order to analyze all aspects of the created "daddy" personas in gay porn and discuss the discourses that were discovered to be related to family relations in gay porn.

### **Created families in the gay community**

Even though a lot has changed in the acceptance of homosexuality in recent history, coming out of the closet is still a traumatic experience for many members of the gay community. Research states that nearly all respondents faced a negative reaction from their parents to their coming out (LaSala 65, Jadwin-Cakmak et al. 283). Laura A. Jadwin-Cakmak et. al. found in their article "Coming Out to Dad: Young Gay and Bisexual Men's Experiences Disclosing Same-Sex Attraction to Their Fathers" (2015) that even when parents claim to be supportive, four out of five

seemingly accepting responses had a form of rejection hidden in them (279-80). While this struggle is often described as an important developmental feat unique to LGBT youth, the rejection by family members can also be seen as a "powerful wounding" that negatively influences all future relations (LaSala 66, Gonsiorek and Rudolph 170). The loss of family support due to coming out is then often replaced by a form of peer support in the gay community, finding a new sort of family to feel connected to (D'Augelli et al. 369).

The peer support in the gay community is often described as a created family, a place in which older gays take the role of the "parents" and younger gays take the role of the "children" (Nesmith et. al. 101-5). In *Gay Men's Friendships: Invincible Communities* (1999), Peter M. Nardi describes this created family relation as "mechanisms of social reproduction in which gay masculinities, gay identities, gay cultures, and gay communities get created, transformed, maintained and passed on" (7). This means that younger gays get "adopted" by older gays in these kinds of created families, the older gays becoming the "role model" and parental figure for the younger gays, passing on their information about the gay experience to the younger generation (Nardi 7, Nesmith et. al. 101-2). The role models offer their "children" informational support about gay life, introduce them to gay culture, and help them find new friends in the gay community (Nardi 7, Nesmith et. al. 101-5). Maybe even more importantly, the new role models are sought out by younger gays to replace the parental advice-giving role, act as a role model and/or offer nurturing, replacing the biological parents in this aspect (Nesmith et. al. 101). The gendered notion of the words "father" and "mother" is replaced in these families by the roles the role models play; "mothers" are gay men or women who fulfill the role of giving emotional support to their "children," "fathers" tend to fulfill more of the informational support (Nesmith et al. 102).

### **The hegemonic masculine ideal and the daddy**

In order to place the daddy-type into context, I must first discuss the hegemonic masculine ideal in contemporary western society.<sup>1</sup> The hegemonic masculine ideal has a wide variety of identifiers connected to it, as it is a fluid term which changes over time and in every society (Chesebro 36). In the current time, the most prevalent identifiers for the body are physical strength, body size, facial hair, a deep voice, and the size of one's genitals (Eguchi 195). Culturally, Shinsuke Eguchi argues in his article "Negotiating Hegemonic Masculinity: The Rhetorical Strategy of

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<sup>1</sup> Every mention of the hegemonic masculine will be about the western society's hegemonic masculine ideal, as this is the sphere in which this paper is located.

'Straight-Acting' among Gay Men" (2009), that a masculine man is expected to be a strict father figure with authority who provides for his family (196). However, and maybe even more importantly, in western culture the hegemonic masculine ideal is shaped by the homosexual experience; as gay behavior is stamped as "effeminate," the opposite of this gay behavior will be seen as masculine (Eguchi 196). As gay men are seen as "talkative, gentle, fashionable, and artistic" (Madon 681), hegemonic masculinity dictates that men who try to fit into this masculinity must act opposed to these behaviors (Eguchi 195-96). Due to this opposition between hegemonic masculinity and gay behavior, Brian Pronger argues in his *The Arena of Masculinity: Sports, Homosexuality and the Meaning of Sex* (1990) that the concept of gay masculinity in the daddy-type must be seen as simultaneously subversive and reactionary, as it both challenges and reinforces this hegemonic masculinity (71).

The challenging of the hegemonic masculine ideal is clear, as having sex with other men is enough to place yourself outside the range of straight masculinity, in whatever way you might identify and/or behave while doing so (Eguchi 196). The reinforcement of the hegemonic masculinity is more important to this paper, as the daddy-type seems to be at the core of this reinforcement. In my personal experience, gay men who identify with the daddy-type more often than not exhibit the bodily identifiers as stated above. However, the age of those who identify as a "daddy" heavily fluctuates. John Mercer states in his article titled "Coming of Age: Problematizing Gay Porn and the Eroticized Older Man" (2012) that this fluidity of age between daddy-types can be explained as the daddy identifier having become less about age and more about what it is not; it is not "youth fixated, grooming and body culture focused," which makes it the opposite of what Mercer calls "the look of the gay scene" ("Coming" 318). In practice, this opposition seems to follow the exact lines of the opposition between hegemonic masculinity and the gay men; however, the opposition is now between the "masculine" daddy and the "feminine" boy, according to Joseph Brennan in his article "'Shouldn't Tom Daley Be a Bottom?' Homosexual Stereotyping Online" 862-63).

### **The porn-persona and the transgressive**

In his 2003 article titled "Gay-for-Pay: Straight Men and the Making of Gay Pornography," Jeffrey Escoffier compares the gay porn industry to that of the star

system<sup>2</sup> in 1920s Hollywood (Ecoffier, *Porn Star* 176-77). However, in contrast to the 1920s star system, the porn performer creates his own persona in order to individualize their place in the industry (Ecoffier, *Porn Star* 176-77). Ecoffier describes this porn persona as:

a character, but it is his 'character'; one that he takes, at least partially, from his own sense of self (i.e. porn film as a medium requires certain 'reality effects' such as erections and orgasms) and from a certain projection of a marketable sustainable role (top, bottom, sex pig, etc.) across various movies. (Ecoffier, *Porn Star* 177)

The daddy-type persona performers have created all seem to follow the same general idea, performing only as masculine and/or dominant tops (Mercer, *Coming* 320). However, the persona is not only a way for porn actors to market themselves in an ever-expanding market. The persona is also used as a way to excuse the act performed in porn, as it is not the actors themselves doing the acts, it is their porn persona ("Gay-For-Pay" 543). In this way, the actor is able to justify performing behaviors they would never exhibit in real life ("Gay-For-Pay" 543). While this could be said for every type of porn, it is especially prevalent in the gay porn industry, as straight actors often use this excuse to justify doing gay pornography: it is not them doing the gay sex, it is their persona. This justification of participating in porn that does not fit their own needs, in this example gay porn, can be brought over to justify their cooperation in the booming yet taboo transgressive porn genre of stepfamily porn, as for the performer, it is their persona participating in the fantasy setting and not themselves.

For this transgressive fantasy to work for the viewer too, it has to feel "real" ("Gay-for-Pay" 536). Ecoffier alludes here to the dual viewing mode of porn for the audience; while the audience probably knows that what they are watching is not "real," they temporarily suspend their disbelief in the pornography's fictional character in order to satisfy their sexual needs ("Gay-for-Pay" 536). Applying this theory to the taboo nature of the porn I am discussing in this paper, it can thus be said that it does not matter if the audience believes the narrative displayed in the scene to be real, as they suspend their disbelief in the narrative in order to believe in what Ecoffier calls the "documentary illusion, [...] which promises to enact certain sexual fantasies and certify them through the 'authenticity' of erections and

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<sup>2</sup> The system in which the film studios created star personas for the actors contractually bound to their studio for both their on- and off-screen lives, and as such controlling an actor's entire life (Pramaggiore and Wallis 371-372).

orgasms" (Escoffier, "Gay-for-Pay" 536). However, the scenario still has to feel as close to real as possible for the audience in order for them to be able to fantasize that their transgressive fantasy is possible in real life when suspending their disbelief (Escoffier, "Gay-for-Pay" 536, Mercer, *Coming* 320, Mercer, *Slammer* 155).

The porn persona created by the actor can help make it easier for the viewer to suspend their disbelief. As porn actors usually stick to their porn persona for a long time, these personas are used to make scenarios feel more real for audiences; when they recognize an actor's coded persona, the audience has to do less work to imagine the scenario as plausible, as they have seen the scenario play out before in a different scene ("Gay-for-Pay" 545). In practice this means that the personas of the daddies have to be just as "believable" as the personas of the sons, conforming to the divide between hegemonic masculine daddies and feminine sons in porn scenes to make it feel more "real" to the audience, as the audience needs this "realness" in order to more easily suspend their disbelief in the transgressions shown in the scene. This conforming to the divide in personalities often means the daddies are represented as straight older males, as straight men fit better into the fantasy of the hegemonic masculine ideal (Mercer, *Slammer* 157).

The twofold meaning of the gay daddy in the gay community shown above creates an interesting intersection of the gay daddy-type: the gay daddy is a role model for younger gays who introduce them into gay life and a prototype of the most attractive aspects of hegemonic masculinity. This twofold meaning is then formed into a porn persona which actors use to distance themselves from their performance. The research in this paper places itself in the middle of this intersection of these three readings, looking at the representation of the family relations in gay porn in scenes including daddy-types.

### **Corpus and methodology**

To analyze this representation, twenty contemporary scenes including the illusion of sexual acts between men with family ties have been selected from all-round gay porn sites [men.com](http://men.com) and [pridestudios.com](http://pridestudios.com), daddy-oriented gay porn sites [hotoldermale.com](http://hotoldermale.com) and [pridestudios.com](http://pridestudios.com) as well as family-oriented gay porn site [familydick.com](http://familydick.com). The scenes have been selected because of their representation of sexual acts between men who act to be related and their relevance to the subject matter of this paper. In addition to this, ten actor profiles on the daddy-oriented gay porn site [hotoldermale.com](http://hotoldermale.com) were analyzed. These scenes were chosen because



of their representation of the daddy-son narrative and their relevance to the subject matter of this paper.<sup>3</sup>

The methodology for this paper can be described as a two-step process. In the first step, a structuralist story analysis as described by Mieke Bal in her 1977 article titled "Strukturalistische verhaalanalyse: Een poging tot systematisering," and a media content analysis as described by Jim Macnamara in his 2005 article titled "Media Content Analysis: Its Uses, Benefits and Best Practice Methodology" are used to analyze literary and media sources respectively. The structuralist story analysis and media content analysis were chosen in order to gain comparable results when analyzing the scene descriptions, the scenes itself, the advertisements of the scenes, and the actor profiles. In the second step, the results from both parts in step one are grouped into three repertoires about the representation of family stepfather and son relations in contemporary gay porn (Wetherell and Potter 172). The repertoires found are: the masculine daddy-type in contrast to the feminine son-type, intragenerational seduction as an achievement, and the representation of the (lack of) taboo around having sexual relations with family members.

### **The masculine daddy-type and the feminine son-type**

The first repertoire that came forth from the analysis describes the narrative in gay porn in which the gay daddy character is represented as fitting into the hegemonic masculine ideal, while the gay son character is represented with more feminine characteristics. This repertoire can be found in all porn sites mentioned in the corpus; in (almost) all scenes that suggest a family relation in the title or scene description, the daddy is the extremely masculine top fucking a feminine bottom. A perfect example of this representation can be found in the *Step Daddy's Basement* series on men.com. In this three-part series an unnamed stepfather and his two stepsons, who are explicitly named as the children of his unseen new wife, have sex in the stepfather's secret SM-basement. In the opening narrative of part one, the first stepson describes the daddy as an authoritative and strict father, being ordered around by the stepfather to do mundane tasks at the breakfast table. This representation coincides with the definition of hegemonic masculinity by Eguchi as given above. Furthermore, the daddy character has the bodily identifiers connected to hegemonic masculinity: he has a big and muscular body, facial hair, a deep voice, and a big penis. This representation can also be seen in the scene description of the third scene, in which the daddy character is referred to as "muscular," "hunky,"

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<sup>3</sup> A full overview of the selected scenes and links to their placement on the sites of origin can be found in appendix 1.

and "a sadistic power-top stepdad," emphasizing the idea that the daddy character in this scene is a masculine man. Besides the identifier of a big penis, the body of the daddy character contrasts with the bodies of the stepson characters, who all have hairless bodies, higher voices, and act submissive to the stepfather character, coinciding with the idea that the bottom son characters fulfill a more "feminine" role in this genre of porn. The scene descriptions further emphasize this representation, as they state that the stepsons need to be taught their place in the family hierarchy and be obedient to their stepfather. This coincides with the idea that the bottom characters are not represented as hegemonic masculine characters, as a hegemonic masculine man should be in charge of their family, like the stepfather character is.

In this repertoire, it is interesting to note that the description of the body of the performer differs significantly between the top daddy performers and the bottom son performers. The model descriptions on the site *hotoldermale.com* show that the descriptions of the performers who identify as a top daddy focus heavily on the body hair and penis size of the performer. For performers such as *Daddy Lucas*, *Lance Navarro*, and *Jack Dixon*, the large size of their penises is boasted in all their descriptions with words as "huge," "fat," and "monster," they are described as "furry" and "hairy" and all three are described as being dominant, fitting into the narrative of the hegemonic masculine ideal. However, the word narrative is important here, as the actual penis size, hairiness, and dominance does not seem to matter. Comparing the three models, their penis size and hairiness differ and they do not take the same dominant positions in the scenes they make an appearance in. The words used are connected to their porn personas of dominant daddy top characters, insisting on their masculinity through the actor descriptions. In comparison, the descriptions of the son bottom characters on the same website represent the exact opposite of the top daddy descriptions. Looking at the actor pages of performers such as *Scott Riley*, *Billy Warren*, and *Felix Lewis*, the descriptions are focused on the pleasure they can give the daddy character. The satisfaction their bodies bring the top daddy are a central point in their descriptions, stating that their goal is to "please older men" and that they leave their daddies "satisfied." Their penis size, body hair, and body types are not mentioned, except for the parts they use to please the daddies. This focus on the pleasure of the daddy characters they have sex with shows the obedience of the bottom performers, as their own sexual pleasure is inferior, enforcing the idea that they do not fit the masculine ideal and therefore are only useful for bringing pleasure to their dominant counterparts.

### **Sexual acts as an achievement**

The second repertoire that came forth from the analysis pertains to the idea that intragenerational seduction is represented as an achievement for the seducing party. This seduction can be found in both the son characters and the daddy characters; the representation of the rationale for this seduction, however, differs between characters. For the son character, the seduction of the daddy character has to do with wanting to get something from the daddy character. In most cases this has to do with the desire to have sex with the daddy character because they are attracted to the masculinity of the daddy character, or because they somehow know the daddy character has a large penis and therefore they want to have sex with him. An example of this seduction as a goal can be found in *Get Your Dick Out Of My Son - Part 1* by men.com. In this scene, the stepson feels the need to sleep with his stepfather because he has seen his large penis when he spied on his stepfather and mother having sex. As he discusses its size with his friend in the kitchen, they accidentally see the stepfather's penis. Afterwards, the friend tells the stepson: "wow, that is a huge dick! [...] you need to get in on that!," making it clear to the audience that it has become the goal for the stepson to sleep with his stepfather. In order to meet this goal, the stepson hides under the covers in his parents' bed and pretends to be his mother when his stepfather comes into the room, representing the idea that the goal justifies any means necessary to get there and firmly securing the idea that he as a bottom is "feminine." This idea can also be seen in *Muscle Stepdad Seduced For Allowance Money* by familydick.com.<sup>4</sup> The narrative of this scene is less detailed than the previous scene, but the core of the story is that the stepson needs money and that the stepfather will not give it to him. In order to seduce the stepfather to give him some money he starts stripping, getting money from his stepfather for each command he fulfills. In this way, there is a duality in the seduction in the scene: the objective of the stepson is to get his stepfather to sleep with him, using the allowance money as an excuse to get him there; the same can be said for the stepfather, using his money to get his stepson to strip for him and eventually have sex with him.

The rationale of the daddy character is one of education and/or punishment, in which the achievement is "giving something" to the son characters. This idea coincides with both the idea that the gay daddy has an educational role in the created gay family and the idea that the daddy character needs to follow hegemonic masculinity in which the daddy is a strict father figure, but sexualizes

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<sup>4</sup> Due to a paywall I was not able to find the real title of this scene. This is the name of the scene on pornhub.com.

these characteristics. In *I Want To Be A Doctor One Day* by familydick.com, the stepfather, who is represented as a doctor in the scene description and through his outfit, is asked by his stepson how to become a doctor. He starts off straight away by giving his son an "anatomy lesson," slowly coaxing his stepson into touching his penis and eventually having sex with him. The goal of this "lesson" is represented as educational, giving the daddy character a justification for the seduction of his stepson. The punishment reasoning can be found in *Boner* by pridestudios.com. The narrative and scene description of this scene suggest that the stepfather has decided he needed to have sex with his stepson in order to show him that he is still in charge, because the stepson came home too late from a party. This makes the sex both punishment and educational; it is punishment for being home too late, and educational to show the stepson his "role" in the family.

### **The representation of the (lack of) taboo**

While it is technically legal to have sex with a non-blood related family member when both parties are over 18,<sup>5</sup> the taboo around having sexual relations with family members in today's society is seen as a moral no-go, as suggested by Michelle Seidel in her article titled "In What States Is It Illegal to Marry Step-Siblings?" (n.d.). This places porn in a difficult situation, as it has to balance the narrative that the transgressive act is as close to real incest as possible in order to more easily suspend the disbelief of the audience while at the same time not going too far as to offend the audience.

The studios in this research balance the "realistic" representation of sex between related men and the moral discussion pretty well, and try to make this balance as clear as possible to the audience. It cannot be missed that every site makes it clear that all actors involved in the scenes are over 18 years old, either through a legal insert into the beginning and/or end of the scene or at the opening screen when going to the site, taking out the taboo of pedophilia. While the actors might still look to be under 18 years old, the legal taboo is taken away, as it is very clearly stated that they are of legal age. The taboo of (blood related-)incest is also taken away by the high-gloss studios, stating that the characters are only step-related in every scene title, description, and almost all in-scene narratives. As pedophilia and incest are possibly the biggest taboos in contemporary society, at least according to Zahra Khan in her 2018 article "An Exploration into the Unknown World of Pedophilia" (42, 44), it can be argued that the studios take these off the table in order not to alienate their audience.

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<sup>5</sup> In the United States, where these scenes are filmed.

However, the studios do represent the idea of close family relations between stepson and stepfather. An example of this can be seen in *My New Brother's Dad: Part One* by [pridestudios.com](http://pridestudios.com), in which the stepson character says in a voice-over that "[his stepfather] was not his real dad, but it sort of felt like he was." This simultaneously makes clear to the audience that there is no blood relation between the characters, but does give the fantasy of a close family relation. [Familydick.com](http://Familydick.com) even takes this a step further: where other high-gloss studios have the characters refer to each other as stepfather/stepdad and stepson, the characters on this site refer to each other as "dad" and "son," furthering the illusion that the characters on screen have a close family bond and blurring the line between blood-relatives and step-relatives. In this way, the studios can play with the idea of family relations and represent the transgressive fantasy as "real" as possible, while still making it very clear to the viewer that the actors are not doing anything (too) immoral and/or illegal.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has discussed the question how the (sexual) relationship between stepfather and stepson characters is represented in high-gloss gay pornography. The first repertoire that was found was that of the hegemonic masculine daddy-type and the feminine son-type, in which the stepfather is represented as a classically masculine authority figure and the son as the opposite, representing him as more feminine. The second repertoire is that of intragenerational seduction as an achievement, in which the achievement of the son-type pertains to the desire to get something from the daddy, either money or his large penis, and the achievement of the daddy-type pertains to the transference of information to the son-type, either through education or punishment. The third repertoire pertains to the representation of (the lack of) the taboo around the representation of sexual relations between men with family ties. In this repertoire, it was found that the studios in this research have to find a careful balance between the fantasy of transgressive intergenerational sex and the moral taboo of incest and pedophilia. However, the studios do try to push the limits in order to make the fantasy feel more "real" to the audience.

While the repertoire of the hegemonic masculine "daddy" top is the most prevalent in current gay pornography research, what is more interesting about this research is the debate that the new discourses about inter- or intragenerational gay family relations and the lack of taboo in the representation of family relations could open up. The results of this paper could be applied to amateur gay porn to see if similar discourses can be found in family-related amateur porn. Due to the

scope and length of this paper, the researched corpus is limited. Moreover, due to the personal finances of the researcher, most scenes could not be accessed on their original website of origin due to a paywall. In future research, researching the content behind the paywall in their original place could be interesting to come to new insights regarding the subject matter.

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## Appendix

*Men.com*

Scene Title	Site of Origin Link	Full Scene Link
Step Daddy's Basement - Part 1	<a href="https://www.men.com/scene/3311418/step-daddy-s-basement-part-1/">https://www.men.com/scene/3311418/step-daddy-s-basement-part-1/</a>	<a href="https://gay0day.com/videos/3374/step-daddy-s-basement-part-1-jack-hunter-tristan-jaxx/">https://gay0day.com/videos/3374/step-daddy-s-basement-part-1-jack-hunter-tristan-jaxx/</a>
Step Daddy's Basement - Part 2	<a href="https://www.men.com/scene/3311446/step-daddy-s-basement-part-2/">https://www.men.com/scene/3311446/step-daddy-s-basement-part-2/</a>	<a href="http://www.gaypornstarstube.xxx/video/step-daddy-s-basement-part-2-XofkIHFdugy.html">http://www.gaypornstarstube.xxx/video/step-daddy-s-basement-part-2-XofkIHFdugy.html</a>
Step Daddy's Basement - Part 3	<a href="https://www.men.com/scene/3311427/step-daddy-s-basement-part-3/">https://www.men.com/scene/3311427/step-daddy-s-basement-part-3/</a>	<a href="https://gay0day.com/videos/3579/step-daddy-s-basement-part-3-jack-hunter-paul-canon-tristan-jaxx/">https://gay0day.com/videos/3579/step-daddy-s-basement-part-3-jack-hunter-paul-canon-tristan-jaxx/</a>
Get Your Dick Outta My Son - Part 1	<a href="https://www.men.com/scene/3274098/get-your-dick-outta-my-son-part-1/">https://www.men.com/scene/3274098/get-your-dick-outta-my-son-part-1/</a>	<a href="https://gaycock4u.com/video/get-your-dick-outta-my-son-part-1-bruce-beckham-michael-delray/">https://gaycock4u.com/video/get-your-dick-outta-my-son-part-1-bruce-beckham-michael-delray/</a>
Get Your Dick Outta My Son - Part 2	<a href="https://www.men.com/scene/3274913/get-your-dick-outta-my-son-part-2/">https://www.men.com/scene/3274913/get-your-dick-outta-my-son-part-2/</a>	<a href="http://www.gaypornstarstube.xxx/video/get-your-dick-outta-my-son-part-2-Q3Kxnch6UJs.html">http://www.gaypornstarstube.xxx/video/get-your-dick-outta-my-son-part-2-Q3Kxnch6UJs.html</a>



Scene Title	Site of Origin Link	Full Scene Link
My New Stepdad is a Pervert - Part 1	<a href="https://www.men.com/scene/12541/my-new-stepdad-is-a-pervert-part-1/">https://www.men.com/scene/12541/my-new-stepdad-is-a-pervert-part-1/</a>	<a href="https://www.myvidster.com/views/video.php?gtype=video&amp;id=100426512&amp;url_title=My_New_Stepdad_is_a_Pervert_Part_1">https://www.myvidster.com/views/video.php?gtype=video&amp;id=100426512&amp;url_title=My_New_Stepdad_is_a_Pervert_Part_1</a>
My New Stepdad is a Pervert - Part 3	<a href="https://www.men.com/scene/15921/my-new-stepdad-is-a-pervert-part-3/">https://www.men.com/scene/15921/my-new-stepdad-is-a-pervert-part-3/</a>	<a href="https://porntube18.cc/drillmyhole-com-my-new-stepdad-is-a-pervert-part-3-adam-herst-jay-rising-travis-stevens-2015-gay-porn/">https://porntube18.cc/drillmyhole-com-my-new-stepdad-is-a-pervert-part-3-adam-herst-jay-rising-travis-stevens-2015-gay-porn/</a>
Shameless Thot	<a href="https://www.men.com/scene/3367739/shameless-thot/">https://www.men.com/scene/3367739/shameless-thot/</a>	<a href="https://megapornfreehd.com/2019/03/shameless-thot-dean-phoenix-michael-delray.html">https://megapornfreehd.com/2019/03/shameless-thot-dean-phoenix-michael-delray.html</a>

*Familydick.com*

Scene Title	Site of Origin Link	Full Scene Link
Muscle Stepdad Seduced for Allowance Money*	Paywall	<a href="https://nl.pornhub.com/view_video.php?viewkey=ph5baca85f4d9b9">https://nl.pornhub.com/view_video.php?viewkey=ph5baca85f4d9b9</a>
I Want to Be a Doctor One Day	Paywall	<a href="https://nl.pornhub.com/view_video.php?viewkey=ph5b8810d3a80ae">https://nl.pornhub.com/view_video.php?viewkey=ph5b8810d3a80ae</a>

Scene Title	Site of Origin Link	Full Scene Link
Caring Step Grandpa Fucks a Boy in The Kitchen*	Paywall	<a href="https://nl.pornhub.com/view_video.php?viewkey=ph5cdd600cb8300">https://nl.pornhub.com/view_video.php?viewkey=ph5cdd600cb8300</a>
Little Twink Learns How to Fuck Step-Father's Tight Hole*	Paywall	<a href="https://nl.pornhub.com/view_video.php?viewkey=ph5a577e7960fa2">https://nl.pornhub.com/view_video.php?viewkey=ph5a577e7960fa2</a>
Drunk Angry Muscle Step-Dad Fucks his Beautiful Son Without Condom*	Paywall	<a href="https://nl.pornhub.com/view_video.php?viewkey=ph5aa1d730d2a74">https://nl.pornhub.com/view_video.php?viewkey=ph5aa1d730d2a74</a>

\*Titles on pornhub, real titles of the scenes are hidden behind the paywall

*Pridestudios.com*

Scene Title	Site of Origin Link	Full Scene Link
My New Brother's Dad: Part One	<a href="https://www.dylanlucas.com/en/film/76953/My-New-Brothers-Dad-Part-One">https://www.dylanlucas.com/en/film/76953/My-New-Brothers-Dad-Part-One</a>	<a href="https://thegay.com/videos/693820/my-new-brother-s-dad-part-1/">https://thegay.com/videos/693820/my-new-brother-s-dad-part-1/</a>
My New Brother's Dad: Part Two	<a href="https://www.dylanlucas.com/en/film/77445/My-New-Brothers-Dad-Part-Two">https://www.dylanlucas.com/en/film/77445/My-New-Brothers-Dad-Part-Two</a>	<a href="https://www.gayporno.fm/my-new-brother-s-dad_1389791.html">https://www.gayporno.fm/my-new-brother-s-dad_1389791.html</a>
Boner	<a href="https://www.dylanlucas.com/en/film/127536/Boner">https://www.dylanlucas.com/en/film/127536/Boner</a>	-

Scene Title	Site of Origin Link	Full Scene Link
Son Baked	Paywall	<a href="https://nl.pornhub.com/view_video.php?viewkey=ph58efcdf189abe">https://nl.pornhub.com/view_video.php?viewkey=ph58efcdf189abe</a>
Respect My Stepdad	<a href="https://www.dylanlucas.com/en/film/118383/Respect-My-Stepdad">https://www.dylanlucas.com/en/film/118383/Respect-My-Stepdad</a>	<a href="https://www.xvideos.com/video31679409/respect_my_stepdad_-_tex_davidson_kyler_ash">https://www.xvideos.com/video31679409/respect_my_stepdad_-_tex_davidson_kyler_ash</a>
Punished	<a href="https://www.dylanlucas.com/en/film/133196/Punished">https://www.dylanlucas.com/en/film/133196/Punished</a>	<a href="https://nl.pornhub.com/view_video.php?viewkey=ph5b9aa2096bd41">https://nl.pornhub.com/view_video.php?viewkey=ph5b9aa2096bd41</a>

*Hotoldermale.com*

Actor Name	Link to Actor Page
Daddy Lucas	<a href="https://www.hotoldermale.com/profile/479-daddy-lucas">https://www.hotoldermale.com/profile/479-daddy-lucas</a>
Lance Navarro	<a href="https://www.hotoldermale.com/profile/551-lance-navarro">https://www.hotoldermale.com/profile/551-lance-navarro</a>
Jack Dixon	<a href="https://www.hotoldermale.com/profile/557-jack-dixon">https://www.hotoldermale.com/profile/557-jack-dixon</a>
Sean Duran	<a href="https://www.hotoldermale.com/profile/522-sean-duran">https://www.hotoldermale.com/profile/522-sean-duran</a>
Max Sargent	<a href="https://www.hotoldermale.com/profile/476-max-sargent">https://www.hotoldermale.com/profile/476-max-sargent</a>

<b>Actor Name</b>	<b>Link to Actor Page</b>
Billy Warren	<a href="https://www.hotoldermale.com/profile/455-billy-warren">https://www.hotoldermale.com/profile/455-billy-warren</a>
Felix Lewis	<a href="https://www.hotoldermale.com/profile/512-felix-lewis">https://www.hotoldermale.com/profile/512-felix-lewis</a>
Scott Riley	<a href="https://www.hotoldermale.com/profile/541-scott-riley">https://www.hotoldermale.com/profile/541-scott-riley</a>
Owen Powers	<a href="https://www.hotoldermale.com/profile/501-owen-powers">https://www.hotoldermale.com/profile/501-owen-powers</a>
Quentin	<a href="https://www.hotoldermale.com/profile/481-quentin">https://www.hotoldermale.com/profile/481-quentin</a>

# Notes from a Kink Club

GABRIEL GEIGER\*

**T**wo metal doors stare at me. The fleeting promise of darkness beyond them. My chest tightens. Breath quickens. In. Out. In. Out. Trying to match the pounding rhythm coming from behind those doors. Boom boom. Boom boom. A heartbeat. I keep telling myself that I'm here now, that I've already bought my ticket. I had to pay full price because I was fully clothed. In, out. In, out. About halfway to matching the rhythm now. Hands are sweating. Sticky. My hands reach for the door. Extensions of some broken machine, rusted, and bleeding gasoline. I open the door. The stairs wink at me. I peek back. I enter the kink club.

The darkness is suffocating. Twisting and coiling itself around me to the violent beat of the music. Post-soviet techno. It's industrial. Peppered with the screeches of metal equipment. Each beat is like a knife stabbing deep into my flesh. Twisting the blade. There are people here. Lots of them. They fade in and out of the sporadic flashes of strobe lights. Their bodies are convulsing. Flickering wisps of smoke pretending to be human.

Most of them wearing black. I am too. At least I got that part right. But there are a million ways to wear black at a kink club. Some people are wearing the staple Berlin black t-shirt. Some have whips hanging from their waists and some have collars around their necks and some have masks on their faces. Those are the ones that are clothed. Then there are the ones who don't have anything on at all. Their genitals flop back and forth as they dance.

I try to move my limbs, but they're mechanical again. Dancing to techno is already weird, it's even weirder in this place. I can't seem to catch up with the others. I'm falling behind. It feels like people are staring at me, but I know they aren't. Should I take my clothes off? My chest is tightening again. I need to get some space.

People are fucking in one of the bathroom stalls. The walls are shaking a bit. I manage to find one that's empty near the end. Shut the door. I can still hear moans from the other stall. Don't focus on them. There's graffiti all over everything.

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I take out the small baggie from inside my pants. A little orange ecstasy pill. Should I flush it down the toilet? No. Break the pill in half. The tightness has left, replaced by the sensation of butterflies tickling my stomach lining. Pop it. It's bitter. I leave the stall and quickly walk out onto the dance floor again. Done.

I've got forty-five minutes until the ecstasy kicks in, but the tantalizing promise of its arrival is already making things better. I'm moving again and I begin to look at the people around me, watching as they move from shadow to flesh in a dance with the darkness. In front of me there's a man wearing nothing but a gas mask and a thong, and alongside him there's a woman waving a large white fan and wearing duct tape over her nipples. The man is swaying and his movements are gentle, a melody that seems at odds with the high tempo of the music. The woman is jerking back and forth, like she's sinking her fingernails into someone and tearing them apart – limb from limb. It would look violent if it weren't for her closed eyes and the large smile cutting across her face – on drugs for sure. In front of them, two men are kissing. One of them has a fluffy pink scarf which the other grabs like a rope, pulling him underneath a leather trench coat. And as he does, the scarf falls to the floor where it lies like a little pink snake, flickering in and out of the flashing lights.

My skin is tingling, a sign that the ecstasy is kicking in. Everything in the room speeds up, and then, simultaneously, slows down as if time is driving under the influence, swerving through this strange world whose soft edges are slowly merging into those of a dream. People and objects and thoughts flutter around me like delicate moths and I have the urge to reach out to them. My body is in sync with the other bodies around me. Our bones and sinews all tremble to the same melody. An uncontrollable smile etches itself into my face. I can't help but feel anything but gratitude for being able to float aimlessly inside this hedonistic pool of desire.

The tingling has turned into a soft buzz arcing through my body, an electrical current. There's nowhere in the world I'm supposed to be right now except in this place, with these people. Are these feelings real? Forget that thought. These thoughts feel genuine, but will they later? Shhhhhh. Feel happy. Feel good. Those feelings are hard to come by.

Drifting through the building, gliding through these narrow and dark halls. I'm one of the moths now. People lean against the walls like shadows and a few reach out to me, fingers sliding across my arm, across my waist, and their touch is faint – they have the hands of ghosts. Strangers in leather. Strangers in latex. Strangers in straps. Strangers being led on chains. There's a humanness to them,

the type of humanness that inevitably comes when a preconceived caricature dissolves into reality, or whatever this is. The stretch marks. The wrinkled lips. A small smile. They are all far too pure and far too honest and far too real for the twisted world that lies just beyond these walls. A societal rock has lifted away, one that I've been told my whole life would house maggots underneath, but instead, all I see on that damp soil, once enshrouded in darkness, is the imprint of my own figure.

I've finally made it to the end of the hallway, where I find a black curtain that obscures whatever acts are producing the labored moans slithering beneath it. It's the sex room. My mind populates the unknown with images and bodies twisting and convulsing in some carnal cult-like dance. Suddenly I find myself back at the beginning of the night, staring at a new door; a door within a door. The effect of the ecstasy is slowly growing stronger and I'm not ready for it to peak in that room. I want to talk to someone. I want to talk to everyone. And people aren't talking in there. What have I even come here to do? Nothing is certain anymore. Moments are fragmented. I'm fragmented. I'm someone else. Fragments of a shattered mirror. Strange thoughts on this dreamy night.

The smoking area is just an empty slab of concrete on the rooftop of the building. I rest my arms on the railing and stare at the sprawling outskirts of the city, at a street lamp flickering in the distance, at the homes of families who have just gone to bed. Fast asleep, they have no idea what is going on up here, we're the figures of their nightmares, their desires.

I'm joined by a man and a woman. He's short, bald, and is led by his partner, a taller woman who I assume is his partner. She's wearing a winter coat over latex. She keeps glancing at me as she caresses the man's shoulder with a small whip. I wonder if I should say something, but they seem older, somewhere in their forties, and that intimidates me. I can't be rude. I need to come up with something, but before I can she says something to me in Dutch.

"I'm sorry I don't speak Dutch," I reply.

"Oh English," she says, "are you okay?"

I turn to face them.

"Yeah, just enjoying the view."

The fascination growing. I want to know about them. My lungs replace oxygen with curiosity.

"I like the writing on your arm," she says, "Can I touch?"

I nod. Her hands are delicate but deliberate, following the curve of each letter with her fingernail: *Stars hide your fires, let not light see my black and deep desires.*

"What's it from?"

"Macbeth. The Shakespeare play."

"I know it's Shakespeare," she says.

I should ask them something, but I don't know what. The first thing that comes to my head. "What do you both do for a living?"

What a stupid question.

"I'm training to be a Kindergarten teacher," she says, glancing at her partner. Up until now he's been silent.

"I work as a software engineer."

"Oh, that's nice," I say. "What do you want to teach?"

She smiles again. It's a smile filled with weight and power. I'm suddenly small.

"How to be dominated."

She gently starts tapping the folded whip against my ass.

"He means what do you want to teach the children," the man says, laughing.

"Oh," she closes her eyes. She thinks it over, still tapping my ass. "Well, I guess... I want to teach them how to be confident. Yeah, confident. Especially the girls. Girls need more of that in this... in this crazy world."

"That's really cool," I reply.

Everything around me is hazy. A mist has crept in, one which makes the world seem blurry and soft. The ecstasy is starting to peak. My jaw is clenching. Skin sweating. Chest tightening. The air is cold but my skin ignores it. The absurdity of the situation hasn't been lost on me. These off people here. Do they come often? Is it their first time as well? I want to know. What do they do to one another behind closed doors? I also want to know. I want to be trapped in this world of hedonism and sensations. I could stay here forever. That thought scares me.

"Are you okay?" she asks. She grasps my arm. She has a tight grip, almost painful, but somehow also calming, soothing even, and the tightness in my chest subsides.

"Can I ask you something?" she continues. The tapping of the whip has turned into a soft hitting now. "How old are you?"

"I'm twenty-one."

"So young. You don't look very experienced either. We could teach you if you like."

I try to answer something, but she cuts me short with a finger on the lips.



"Think about it. You can always find us later."

She leads her partner away from me and back down to the darkness below, fading away.

There are red rose petals in front of the black curtain. I pick one up to see if it's real. So delicate. I bring it to my lips and then let it fall on my tongue like a snowflake. I'm at the final gateway of this dream and for some reason it seems quieter than I expected. Deep breath. Another. Then I slip through the curtains. Slip through them like everyone there is sleeping. Slip through them like they have to wake up early in the morning.

Kissing. Thrusting. The smell of sex is strong. I could cup it in my hands if I wanted to. There are a couple cots. A couple couches. I sit on one, unsure of what to do. There's a faint light coming from an LED bulb in the corner. Enough to make everyone look like an outline of a body. My eyes have to adjust to it, have to adjust to the scenery. There's a swing that looks like a hammock in front of me. Two bodies in it. The swing rocking back and forth. Their bodies rocking back and forth. It's hypnotizing, this bodily pendulum will never end. I hardly even notice the man giving a blowjob beside me. He looks up at me and I smile back awkwardly. I move to another sofa.

A guy and a girl sit down next to me. They're younger, probably close to my age.

"Where are you from?" she asks me.

"California."

She smiles.

"Cali boy."

"And you?"

"Berlin."

It's hard for me to look her in the eyes. I glance over somewhere else. Four bodies in a dog pile. I can't even tell who's who. A fleshy hydra. In the corner the outline of somebody with their hands strapped to a pole and getting fucked with a strap on. Beside them, two naked women are taking a break, taking pauses in their conversation to take a sip from a tall glass of water.

"Why are you here?" the guy asks me.

"I don't really know, to be honest," I say. A pause. "Why are you here?"

"I'm here to play."

Another pause. Then he asks me:

"Do you want to play?"

I'm trembling. This couch is the electric chair. I smile. I nod. She kisses me first. Her mouth is warm and she has a piercing on her tongue. He takes off my shirt and touches my skin. He's gentle, but there's a roughness too. A subdued roughness. A precision, like a surgeon. The ecstasy makes every graze of the skin pulse through my entire body.

"You have nice skin," he whispers in my ear.

I should pay him a compliment back. But I don't know what. He starts to kiss me and the girl moves to my neck. Her nails are long. They dig into my back. Digging deeper and deeper. Her nails like swords, his beard like needles.

Her lips find the tattoo on my back. Her hair, red like the roses outside, brushes against it. It's a redwood tree. A reminder of home. She kisses it. He's moving further down, my body is clenching like a fist. Further down. Suddenly there's a warm sensation. Rhythmic movement. She keeps kissing it. That doesn't feel right. The piercing on her tongue is scraping against home. Swallowed inside the dark embrace of her mouth.

Thoughts start spilling into my head. My mind is bleeding, just like my back. All those confused feelings from growing up. From growing up in a small town. The repression of those urges. Wanting to fuck boys? Wanting to fuck girls? Wanting to fuck everyone outside and in between? You're a fucking freak. That's what you are. Imagine if your parents found you here. Imagine if they had any idea of those thoughts and desires that slither through your brain. Half of your family would disown you. Your friends would think you're disgusting. And maybe you are.

And now she's touching something from a different me. A me that I had tied up before coming here, but who now has broken out and is tearing me apart from the inside out. It's not that me that's supposed to be here, doing this. I'm supposed to be someone else here. Buried fragments have risen from the grave. The dream is cracking. I'm falling on the shards.

I pull away and look at them. Disappointed. Not in them, but in myself. They look back, concerned.

"I'm sorry. It's not you." I struggle for words. "It's a lot. I'm sorry." I pause again. "It's just a lot. I'm sorry."

They tell me that I shouldn't worry. I shouldn't do anything that I'm not comfortable with. I leave while they're still talking to me.

I'm sitting down, my back pressed against the cold hallway wall. The big question. Why am I here? Searching for some form of validation. To feel like I belong. And now I'm sitting here alone and I want to cry. The loneliness is a river now. That need for belonging a pulse. Everything is numb. Everything is faint. Physical sensation

has become an echo. A dying heartbeat. The line between dream and nightmare is fragile. The ecstasy tells me that it's still an experience. That it can still be important. That it can still mean something. I'm trying to listen to it, but another part of myself, one that I've seemed to have forgotten when I popped that little orange pill, is telling me otherwise. It's like I'm trying to stab a knife into my heart, but the ecstasy dulls it just as it's about to cut in.

Oscillating between a place of emptiness and fullness. Swinging back and forth like the bodies. Sliding down the peak of this dream, dreary and deflated. A soft techno song plays in the background. A looped rhythm as a monotone voice repeats, in German, *Ich will eine Maschine sein. Arme zu greifen. Beine zu gehen. kein Schmerz. Kein Gedanke.* I roll my head back against the wall. *Ich will eine Maschine sein.* I close my eyes. *Arme zu Greifen.* They feel like they're going to roll out of their sockets. *Beine zu gehen.* I wish they would. *Kein Schmerz. Kein Gedanke.*

My thoughts are swirling in my head. I see someone sitting farther down from me. I walk over and sit down beside them. Their makeup is messy. Mascara running down their face. Two black waterfalls.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

They look over at me. There's a faint smile on their face.

"Yes, honey. Just need a little bit of a break from the whole thing." They gently tap my arm a few times, "And you darling?"

"I guess I also need a break."

They laugh. Their voice is soft and gentle.

"You're a pretty boy," they say.

"You're pretty too."

"You're young."

"I feel young."

"If you keep coming to these things like me, you'll need lots of breaks."

"I don't know if I will."

They smile knowingly.

"We'll see."

"Yeah we will."

"Why did you start coming to these?" I ask.

"To be myself. And you?"

"To be someone else."

"And do you think that that someone else belongs here?"

I roll my head back against the wall. I stare up at the ceiling.

"They could someday."

They grab my head between their hands.

"Honey, that someone else will always belong here. Even if they never come back."

I smile. Again, I'm like a child. Again, I want to cry.

"Here honey, let me put some eyeliner on you. You'll look pretty in it."

They take out the pen. They press it down. Near the waterline. It's kind of painful. A tear slides down my cheek. It's delicate. Almost tickling.

"Look up honey. There you go."

They finish and turn my head. They cup it in their hands again.

"You look beautiful honey."

"Thank you."

"What's your name?" I ask.

"We don't do names here."

They move closer to me. Their lips are bright red. Like the girl's hair from the sex room. Like the rose petals on the floor. They kiss me. They stand up. They point to my lips. They laugh.

"I'm going back in honey. You might wanna go to the bathroom and wash up."

They disappear through the curtain.

The bathroom is empty now, which means it must be getting late. I look at myself in the mirror, staring at the eyeliner circling my eyes, the skin draping around them. They look tired and they look pretty in a childish way, just like the bright red lipstick smeared all over my mouth. I smile at myself in the mirror.

The lights go on. The music shuts off. It must be time to leave. They're harsh and they sear my eyes and they burn my skin. The black curtains fall from the windows and the outside world floods in, invading the once soft and sacred darkness. As I walk upstairs, the promise of morning becomes more and more frightening. People are changing back into their normal clothes. Masks and wigs come off, latex and leather are exchanged for cotton and polyester, collars are replaced with winter coats, and whips are being stowed inside purses. People are calling taxis and searching for their metro cards. Some of them have to work in the morning.

Moving from this to normality. Now I have to do the same. They all seem so comfortable doing it, but I don't. Just the thought of going back into the outside world seems repulsive, perverted. For a second I wish they would lock the doors and we could all stay here forever. Even in my momentary fantasy I'm a nameless shadow on the wall, half of myself within, half of myself without. I'm content with that for now.

The dream is ending, the haze slowly clearing. The distant world below the stairs is gone now. My shirt is heavy. My eyes are aching. I feel a familiar hand around my arm. It's the woman from the rooftop, except she's in normal clothes now, and her grip is soft.

"Don't you have gloves?" she asks.

"No, I don't," I say, "I forgot them at home."

"You fragile little thing. Your hands are going to freeze to death out there."

She reaches into her bag and searches around for a second.

"Here, take these," she says, draping a pair of long latex gloves across my arm. "A little gift from me."

"Oh, no I can't," I say, "really it's not that—"

Cut off again by a finger on the lips. Then she walks away. In a staring contest with the door again. I put my hand inside one of the gloves. It almost reaches my elbow. Slowly zip it up. It feels tight around my arm. I like it. Repeat with the other hand. They're smooth, brushing against my skin every time I move. A natural extension of my body. I put on my coat, making sure to pull the sleeves over the latex gloves before finally opening the door.