

Scars for Life(s)

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ABSTRACT: This essay considers the relationship between performance, disability, and the ephemera of wounding experiences by using bodily scars as method for multi-temporal and multi-spatial reflection. Thinking through the “Freak Show” season of the television series *American Horror Story*, this essay locates coalitional potential in scars as they offer sites from which to create new stories of the past.

KEYWORDS: Disability; Scar; Performance; Culture

Operation Ephemera

Some people take first day of school pictures to document the passage of time. Instead, I have x-rays, photos of blue hairnets that barely cover my head, and more photos of my feet right after the cast is sawed away, right before the stitches or staples come out because the surgeries I had were my father’s surgeries, and my brother’s surgeries and... These photos don’t document time linearly. They aren’t displayed in an album in a particular order. They all sit in one shoe box. Each merges with the next: purple cast fragments, screws lodged in bone, staples in a row, beforeafter while afterbefore, white walls, blue hairnets, hospital blankets, IV drips, purple cast fragments. The scars are reopened by new operations. I’ve lost track of the number of surgeries. I certainly don’t remember the dates (see figure 1).



Figure 1. Jessica Stokes’ Foot X-ray, Grand Rapids. Personal x-ray of author. Date unknown.



Figure 2. Matthew Stokes’ Foot X-ray, Grand Rapids. Courtesy of owner. Date unknown.

The same surgeon’s hands cut open my little brother, too. My brother doesn’t keep the photos in a shoe box, but instead, he stores them on his cellphone (see figure 2). For some time, he has been showing the photos off to everyone he meets. Each reveal is a performance: “My friends mostly got used to them. But some kids would gag, recoil, or hide

behind their hands. It was pretty fun” (M. Stokes, personal communication, 21 Nov 2016). My brother and I both hold onto the ephemera of our surgeries. In a ziplock bag, I have pins like the five shown in my brother’s foot in figure 2. At the end of each of my toes, I have a small pink dot or wrinkled skin that corresponds to each pin. With this debris, we travel to places unknown, we perform crip, and we bond with one another.

In his book *Cruising Utopia*, José Esteban Muñoz discusses the timeline of performance according to performance studies: “It has become somewhat axiomatic within the field of performance studies that the act exists only during its actual duration” (71). This same sentiment is confirmed in the work of Peggy Phelan: “Performance’s only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance” (146). Muñoz goes on to label this something other than performance as ephemera: “Ephemera are the remains that are often embedded in queer acts, in both stories we tell one another and communicative physical gestures” (65). He argues there is “a case for a hermeneutics of residue that looks to understand the wake of performance” (71). I argue that scars already offer a language and method for this kind of interpretation. And I turn to television, a medium that is circulated and “saved, recorded, documented” in order to apply the language of scars. In this essay, I then go on to examine the overlaps and frictions of race, queerness, and disability as they exist in the ephemera/scarring of characters’ on *American Horror Story: Freak Show*.

Surface and Absence

Scars accentuate the surface: “Most crucially, the protein fibres in normal tissue have a random (basketweave) appearance, while those in scar tissue have pronounced alignment in a single direction” (Sherratt). They exist as sites of wounding and healing simultaneously. While performance studies may attempt to limit performance to the act, the scar has no such limits. The processes in motion within the frame of a performance (say in an operating room or car crash or...) have no simple start/finish. They are changed as the shape of the scar changes. As the stories people tell about the scar change, so too does the car crash or the operation. Ephemera are not simply an aftermath of performance. They can perform again (when my brother holds up the photos of his feet to provoke a reaction) and can undo

performance (when the performance is still happening in the telling of the scar, it can both undo and remake).

In Alison Kafer's book *Feminist Queer Crip*, she discusses how disability is often perceived as loss even when no loss has occurred: "But even those who have been disabled since birth are confronted with questions of temporal longing, expected to mourn what they never had" (43). Consider the term congenital amputation: "absence of a limb at birth, usually because of constriction of the part by an encircling amniotic band" (Dorland 67). Sometimes this constriction prevents the limb from forming at all. Sometimes the limb falls away due to lack of blood flow. Both circumstances are described as "amputation." People born with one leg or four fingers are perceived, according to the research of Susan Wendell and Robert McRuer and the embodied knowledge of Eli Clare, as having been wounded even if no wounding occurred (Kafer 43). They are described "with an assumption that all disabled people long for a lost whole, pre-illness, pre-disability body" (43). In discussing absence and the scar then, I have no desire to conjure some past whole. Just as the allegedly whole, hypernormal body does not exist neither does the allegedly whole performance constituted by an act with a definable beginning and end.

Rather than look to scars for a reminder of what is lost, then, I turn to them for the presence of the unseen. Scars can remind us of what is under the skin: the metal in my feet that goes unseen without an X-ray. Scars can connect us to pasts (as I will discuss with *American Horror Story: Freak Show*). Scars can induce unstoppable futurity (remaining on the body even after death or taken from the body to be stored somewhere else as biometric data).

Under the Skin in *American Horror Story*

In a seemingly strange twist, I will now turn to a genre known for spectacle to talk about the unseen aspects of the scar. As a genre, horror has historically been connected to disabled figures (Smith 27); however, the particularly violent and scarring nature of the series *American Horror Story* offers up multiple complex forms of wounding and scarring for consideration. Just after the opening credits in episode three of *American Horror Story: Freak Show*, Ethel, a character who performs as the Bearded Lady, visits a small town physician in Jupiter, Florida. In this scene, her doctor delivers the news that she has

advanced cirrhosis of the liver; there is “a good deal of fibrosis” (“Edward Mordrake Part 1” 7:19), the doctor says. He initially refuses to divulge how long he expects Ethel to live, saying, “I believe hope is a strong medicine; I don’t like to tell patients to give up hope” (7:29). However, at her request he gives her a prognosis of six months to a year to live. This comes with the caveat to eat very little meat and not take “a single drop of alcohol” (9:02). This scene demonstrates the convergence of several iterations of unseen scarring.

Even Ethel’s physical scars are unseen in the scene. Cirrhosis is the replacement of tissue within the liver by scar tissue; it causes jaundice, fluid build-up, hypertension, coma, and death (Dorland 364). The unseen scars on Ethel’s organ lead to a prognosis of death, but they also open other temporalities. Following the prognosis, Ethel begins to cry. While her doctor believes she is crying due to loss of hope, Ethel clarifies: “I ain’t crying ‘cause you told me I’m gonna die; I’m crying ‘cause you’re the first doctor ever treat me with respect. I just can’t help thinking my whole life mighta gone different if I’d met you sooner” (9:09). Ethel’s prognosis results in her feeling an alternative timeline. In this timeline, she does not go back to a pre-illness body. Instead, she perceives a world in which she has a doctor who is not ableist for a longer portion of her life, a world where her body is respected as it is. The physical scarring of Ethel’s liver is the site of multiple physical, social, and temporal spaces.

Because Ethel’s scarring moves into a future beyond her control, (her) liver also opens her up to unwanted futurity. The first four minutes of the same episode are set in the American Morbidity Museum, where another liver is on display. Ethel’s liver, though not seen in the museum, speaks to the posthumous collection and continued violence done upon non-normative bodies. The scarring of her liver also exists in many different temporalities: in her history of alcohol use, in the healing space she found in the community of “freaks” (where she ceases drinking and begins again), and in her potential death.

When I call scars multitemporal, I am thinking of them as both queer and crip. In Carrie Sandahl’s piece “Queering the Crip or Crippling the Queer?” she states: “the most significant similarity between these disciplines, however, is their radical stance toward concepts of normalcy; both argue adamantly against the compulsion to observe norms of all kinds (corporeal, mental, sexual, social, cultural, subcultural, etc.)” (26). I believe temporal norms reside within the “etc.” Ethel’s diagnosis of scarring marks an overlap of queer and crip

temporalities. Ethel lives outside of “normal” time. After her diagnosis, Ethel sits down with the character Dell who is billed as the strongman in the freak show. In this scene, the audience learns that Dell is Ethel’s ex and the father of her son Jimmy who she raised without Dell. Ethel looks back again on her past, asking: “When we was[sic] talking about moving to the burbs, and I showed you that brochure for Levittown, why’d you lead me on?” (“Edward Mordrake, Part 1” 30:16). But this time Ethel cannot vividly imagine an alternative temporality where she settled down in the suburbs. Instead, she answers her own question: “we never would have made it out there anyway. Cookie cutter was never in our cards” (“Edward Mordrake, Part 1” 30:16). Ethel exists in queer time and space, which “develop, at least in part, in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction” (Halberstam 1). Even when prognosis time places Ethel in what Kafer describes as “a liminal temporality, a casting out of time; rather than a stable, steady progression through the stages of life, time is arrested, stopped” (36), Ethel remains unable to imagine or even experience a glimpse of what normal time would have been like for her.

After her diagnosis, Ethel ignores the doctor’s call to avoid alcohol and red meat. Instead, after not having consumed alcohol in many years, she chooses to drink again. To Ethel, the scarring of her liver highlights the existence of the past as well as the future in the present moment. The history of her drinking, which she had ceased “since Jimmy’s 18th birthday,” as well as the future of her supposedly imminent death, become the focus of her every day. Being refused even an imaginary of the suburban life she had hoped for, Ethel instead finds a space for herself and her son within the freak show, a group that is repeatedly shown and described as frequently using (among other drugs) alcohol. Ethel’s rejection from the suburbs—a supposedly “normal” community—places her in a space where alcohol use leaves invisible but felt and potentially fatal scarring on her liver. This scar marks the memory of her exclusion, but at the same time becomes a precarious place of healing within the community of carnies.

While scars can act as ephemera of wounding, they can also become places of healing. Just as scars push the flesh back together, so can shared scars push together a community. Because the protein fibers in unscarred skin are described as looking weaved together — “basketweave appearance” — and those in scars are described as having “pronounced

alignment in a single direction” (Sherratt), it might become easy to mistake the scar as a linear or singular space to form community upon. In describing community formation around scars, Karen Hammer states: “thus, scars become not only evidence of wounding, but also a new surface on which to form community and intimacy” (160). This understanding of the scar as a “new surface” places the scar as the aftermath of the wounding and seems to suggest a linear timeline. This linear thinking about the scar as community mirrors linear thinking about community in general, but limits the potential of the scar. In Thomas Bender’s *Community and Social Change in America*, he pushes back against Ross’ formation of “a linear model of change” which focuses on “transforming community into society, that is, replacing living tissue with structures held together by rivets and screws” (Ross qtd. in Bender 35). In arguing against Ross’ linear conception of community giving way to society, Bender suggests that community is not a particular location and instead is an “enduring form of social interaction” (43). Community for Bender is not a structure of the past we need to be nostalgic for, nor is it a structure of the past we need to overcome and replace with a future model. Instead, community is a system of interactions and counteractions that alter and re-form the social dynamic. In that sense, the scar informs the ways that community can form, reform, and deform in both the spatial and temporal realms. The powerful intimacy of the scar is made possible because of its ability to influence interaction across times.

Scarring Through Times

American Horror Story: Freak Show is set in Jupiter, Florida, in 1952. Within the world of the show, the titular freak show is only one of two freak shows that remain (“Edward Mordrake, Part 1” 3:10). This setup suggests linearity. The community of the freak show must give way to a new social model following the expected homicidal events of the “horror” story. However, after nearly every member of the show is murdered, their stories do not open a path to some new world. Instead, the final scene of the season steps out of linear temporality. The performers are not dead (or they are but dead doesn’t mean done). Instead, they are shown in a space that mirrors Jupiter’s freak show, but is a continuous cycle of “[f]ull house every night. Family together” (“Curtain Call” 48:19). It is a perpetually performing posthumous freak show. The community is not something of the past or the future, but rather, it is connected through times.

Looking through scars reminds us of the potential futures off screen. Often, disability “becomes the future of no future” (Kafer 33). In discussing this concept Kafer quotes Isaac, a young black man in Chicago with a spinal cord injury: “I’m supposed to be dead in jail or in a chair. Some people look at it like that and that kinda bothers me. Just because I’m an African-American that means what?” (Isaac qtd. Kafer 33). Disability is placed alongside death, imagined as an expected outcome for some in a particular neighborhood of Chicago where “the statistical likelihood that young, black men [...] will be paralyzed (if not killed) by gunshot wounds serves to push them outside of time” (Kafer 33). Thinking through the scar can push back against this ideology that equates disability with death by showing communities which share disability on screen.

While most of the freak show performers are killed in *Freak Show*, their representation marks a point of healing for some people with disabilities who are often written out of mainstream narratives. In discussing the prosthetics used by Jimmy, who performs as Lobster Boy, Kim Kelly—a blogger with ectrodactyly—remarks: “Jimmy Darling is the first television character I’ve ever seen who looks like me. For me, that alone almost makes up for those damn prosthetics” (Kelly). The appearance of a character with ectrodactyly takes steps to improve the visibility and validity of disability, even if *American Horror Story* accentuates the disability with extreme approximation through prosthetics. Unfortunately, this increased representation of white disability continues to leave out representation of lives of disabled people of color.¹ While living with a disability as a white person is often socially constructed as “disability as tragedy or loss,” in Isaac’s case, “loss is not the defining frame because there was nothing to ‘lose’” (Kafer 33). The assumption that a person of color will end up dead or in a chair is the result of bias both on and off the screen. While *American Horror Story* takes steps to represent disability, it ultimately leaves out many interactions at the intersection of race and disability.

¹ While there is a good deal of conversation regarding *American Horror Story*’s “Freak Show,” some of the more critical voices can be found here:

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/sep/26/disabled-people-freak-show-horror-story-pop-culture> and here: <http://globalcomment.com/the-not-so-feminist-dream-logic-of-american-horror-story-freak-show/>.

Thinking through scars emphasizes what is absent or at least unseen: the history of people of color and disabled individuals as performers in freak shows, as compared to the cast of *Freak Show*. In his exploration of the illogic of what is considered natural and unnatural, Eli Clare examines the makeup of the original freak shows on which this season of *American Horror Story* is based. “Throughout the centuries, rich white men have determined people of color, poor people, LGBT people, women, indigenous people, immigrants, and disabled people to be *savage*, non-human animals, close to nature [...] both natural and unnatural” (20; author’s emphasis). For these reasons, performers in freak shows were individuals determined to be, or forced to perform as, *savage*. In one of the more famous circuses—Barnum and Bailey’s—multiple members of their freak show were billed as the missing link: William Henry Johnson and Krao Farini performed as “What-Is-It” and “Ape Girl” respectively, or both at different times as “The Missing Link” (Clare 21). Often these were people of color and/or physically or intellectually disabled individuals: cast outside of time, cast from *other* places (think conjoined twins billed as from Siam, cast off).

The cast of *American Horror Story* is predominantly white and able-bodied, despite its subject matter. Like Alison Kafer, I don’t want to “make the case that racism and classism are really ableism [...] as if everything collapses into disability; rather, I want to insist that these categories are constituted by and through each other” (Kafer 32-33). By examining the intersection of race and disability as they play out in *American Horror Story: Freak Show*, I intend to think through the scar as it appears where disability and race interact within the show. While the show offers some representation and performs in multiple temporalities, it highlights issues without offering recourse. This elision of people of color and disabled people emphasizes what is gruesomely present: violence.

Unstoppable Futurity

The closeness of those in the freak show arises out of the shared experience of having scarring that is apparent to a society that privileges an arbitrary “normal.” The stories that these individuals tell one another are that they are a part of a community marked by lingering difference. “[T]he ways in which we prove queerness and read queerness, [*sic*] is by suturing it to the concept of ephemera” (Muñoz 65). The acts of wounding and separation that the freak show performers have experienced mark them with these scars: ephemera of

wounding that also forms a part of a healing community. The community of the freak show comes together around these marks, just as they form other scars through their shared lifestyle.

However, non-normative bodies can have the scar placed upon them without consent. In *Freak Show*, several characters' bodies are congenitally different though they often are perceived as 'missing something.' In the fourth episode, Paul—who performs as the Illustrated Seal— explains why he had his body tattooed: “the world hated me [...] the world wanted a monster? I decided to give them one” (“Edward Mordrake Part 2” 4:11). The world at large placed judgement on the formation of his arms, making their appearance into a scar which brought with it the same stigma as the loss of an arm through a wounding event. This process ultimately prompted Paul to have his arms and body tattooed with fur to fix his place within the freak show. Paul's scars in this case are his tattoos: they show the historical affective wounding of stigma that he experienced as a young man, and remain on his body through life—even appearing on his character in the final “afterlife” scene. Scars are multitemporal: existing in the moment of injury, changing that moment by changing our recollection of it, and signaling that moment on the body after death.

Again, not all those who are scarred to become a part of this community do so of their own volition. One character, Penny, begins the series as an able-bodied hospital volunteer. Over the course of the season, she falls in love with Paul. In Episode 7, “Test of Strength,” her father declares that her desire to be associated with the freak show puts his reputation at too great a risk. In *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz notes that evidence has been used historically to discipline queerness (65). Penny's connection to the freak show is an act her father decides to penalize by marking her skin with tattoos and forking her tongue (“Test of Strength” 38:17). This violence is forced upon Penny, who already has a place in the freak show through her love of Paul, to mark her as a part of that community to those outside of the freak show—it's a forced removal from “normal” that her father believes is conditional to her association with the performers. While Penny's forced scarification happened in life, the markings which last beyond death can be used to force bodies into non-communal afterlives. While some may get to choose where and how they are buried and whether or not they are

displayed, many of the characters in *American Horror Story* and many cast in freak shows of the past did not have such a choice.

The bodies of non-normative individuals who did not necessarily choose to be a part of a community are collected posthumously for display. In *Freak Show*, a central thematic element is one antagonist's attempt to collect body parts or whole dead bodies from the performers. In "Edward Mordrake Part 1," the audience is introduced to the "American Morbidity Museum" (based on the Mütter Museum in Philadelphia) which is interested in buying authentic examples of "the strange wonders of the human body and [...] the horrors of disease and disorder" ("Edward Mordrake Part 1" 0:27). Among the skulls, skeletons, and organs on display is the conjoined liver of Chang and Eng, which foreshadows Ethel's diagnosis while also conjuring images of her potential fate. The conversation around Chang's and Eng's liver does not mention anything about their youth, performance, or later life; it only categorizes them by the spectacle of their non-normative bodies. While the scar can be used to bring groups together when they are willing to share, it is also used to mark others outside of a perceived "norm" and to posthumously type and gather non-normative bodies.

The physical space of the scar is a queer landscape, as it is a tangible, physical location that conjures other spaces. While the scar is located on the body as a mark that hearkens to past and future temporalities, it also acts as a means to connect the body to other locales and to locate the place and method of wounding. The scar acts as a medium to reach the community of the freak show as well as the space of the museum. It reaches across time and space to show us that the body does not end at the skin.

The scar is made through interaction in time and place. It tells of the violence of that interaction. In responding to Donna Harroway's question "should a body end at the skin?" Jasbir Puar discusses the way

the value of a body is increasingly sought not only in its capacity to do labor but in the information it yields—[...] if there is no such thing as excess, or excess info, if all information is eventually used or at least seen as having imminent utility—we might ask whether this is truly a revaluing of otherwise worthless bodies left for dying. (164)

In this way, the scar reaches beyond a surface marking and inhabits multiple places. In the accumulation of DNA information that is Puar's focus, a scar is left on the body from the

puncturing act of taking a sample, but it also marks the apparatus of collection: the needle which draws a sample from the body and the building that houses these needles. The scar then manifests at the intersection of multiple times, multiple places, and as a space of multiple perspectives: “it is at the border—territorial, epidermal, and digital—a site where certain bodies are cast out and made out of place, that a critical biometric consciousness [...] can be realized” (Browne 129). Here, Simone Browne is making the case that it is at the level of the body, and where the body interacts with the world around it, that real human connections can be made. Crucial to this interaction at the place of the scar—the bodily space that extends to others in the world— is the “face-to-face relation, [*sic*] between different actors [...] of equal worth” (Gilroy qtd. Browne 129). The scar makes this relation equal by drawing multitemporal and multispatial connections. The memory of the wound through the scar can exist both with the person wounded and the machinery of those wounding. The scar has potential for unwanted intimacy, for travel to places unknown, and for unstoppable futurity.

The marking of the scar acts on performers both in life and beyond life, exploring the biopolitics of collection and branding. Both forms of branding are relevant to this argument, but first it is necessary to look at the historical use of the brand on human bodies that were accumulated and used in slavery. Scarring enslaved people through the use of brands was a practice by which their bodies were marked as captive social and economic commodities (Browne 93). The process of branding is the scarring of the flesh of a person of color intended to be used without consent for economic gain. The site of the brand then acts multitemporally on the body of the slave; it is an initial physical wound which opens up a lifetime of exploitation, further wounding, and will be upon the skin until after death. This branding is an initial iteration of other forms of marking the accumulation of black people to justify United States cultural growth and practice.

Black people continue to be scarred in order to advance hegemonic social formations in the United States. In Frank Wilderson III’s “Gramsci’s Black Marx,” he argues that “from the incoherence of black death, America generates the coherence of white life” (232). This formation continues in the branding/scarring of the flesh. The slave trade continues in hegemonic culture structures: “in the socio-political order of the New World the black body

is a ‘captive body’ marked and branded from one generation to the next” (236). Black people continue to be marked, albeit in different ways in order to continue producing a (supposedly) coherent American narrative. To that end, it is necessary to examine how race fits with the branding of the *American Horror Story* narrative in *Freak Show*.

American Horror Story as a show itself is invested in immediately tangible spectacle and extreme violence as its method of entertainment. Throughout this and every season, *American Horror Story* relies on the promise of overt violence to convey its stories. In this season alone, there are moments where people are crushed (“Test of Strength”), eviscerated (“Blood Bath”), used to make literal blood baths, shot, stabbed, and bludgeoned to death (“Curtain Call”). The readily visible violence of the main plot initially targets people of color before expanding to the rest of the cast. Two of the perpetrators of this violence are Stanley, a con man gathering freak show performers and their body parts for profit, and Dandy, an immature, white, wealthy man who kills to relieve the boredom of being too affluent. Dandy, after at first failing to take a life due to incompetence and lack of will, dons the mask of the show’s first antagonist (a clown who was on a killing spree to make children happy) and proceeds to slit the throat of Dora, his African-American house maid. The dynamic here is a clearly visible attack from a privileged, white figure on a black person: a source of labor that Dandy knows can be replaced through expenditure of his accumulated capital.

The first victim of Stanley’s manipulation is Ma Petite, billed as the World’s Smallest Woman. While Stanley does not directly kill Ma Petite, he blackmails the strong man into crushing her, whereupon Stanley sells her body to the American Morbidity Museum for thousands of dollars. In both of these cases, the violence is overt and striking. This obvious brutalism aligns with Martinot and Sexton’s “The Avant Guard of White Supremacy.” In their article, they discuss the dependence of the US police state on the visibility and justification of police violence against black people. They discuss the overkill and oversentencing that is brought on black people: “Its secret is that it has no depth. There is no dark corner that, once brought to the light of reason, will unravel its system [...] it is, in fact, nothing but its very practices” (Martinot and Sexton 175). The brand of *American Horror Story* is built on this same hyper-visible violence. Some comment on the show’s steadily increasing focus on

“gross-out graphics” (Conner). It is not the spectacle itself that addresses the audience beyond the singular gruesome moment. Instead, the affective wounding of these scenes leaves scars that have greater depth than the momentary act of violence could convey. This overt violence draws the mind to scar; in this case its unwoven, protruding arrangement of protein fibres is a reminder not to unmask the scar, not to look beneath it, but rather to recognize and address the surface wounding and to come together to scar that wounding.

Wounded Community

In a 2016 *New York Times* article “The End of Identity Liberalism,” Mark Lilla speaks about the failure of identity politics as a political maneuver. Lilla states that “politics in healthy periods is not about ‘difference,’ it is about commonality” (Lilla). He argues that “Liberals should bear in mind that the first identity movement in American politics was the Klu Klux Klan” and that “those who play the identity game should be prepared to lose it” (Lilla). Of course, to argue that the Klan plays the identity game, when a big part of their organization centers on masking their identity seems like a questionable start. But even more questionable is the assumption that “real [...] modern American liberalism” is founded on demanding freedoms for “everyone in the world” (Lilla). Lilla quotes a speech given by Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1941 to make this point. Looking through scar allows us to consider the multiple temporalities existent in this speech and to remember that in 1942 Franklin D. Roosevelt ordered the internment of Japanese Americans. Lilla ignores the wounding that marks people as “different” in these supposedly healthy periods: that prevents their needs from being addressed by calls for freedom for all.

Thinking through the scar lets us see the need for the kinds of connections that Lilla tries to foreclose. In the case of Penny, her choice to associate with the group of freak show performers becomes a site of conflict with the social pressures of her father. That conflict results in a direct and permanent scarring through her facial tattoos and forked tongue. The space of her identity that is forced to the surface of the scar is not only a place of injury, but it becomes a place of healing as well. In the following episode, the female performers of the freak show gather together to help her get revenge on her father. While getting ready, Penny tries to let them out of their commitment, but they respond with, “honey, you’re family. We take care of our own” (“Blood Bath” 30:11). When the unscarred Maggie tries to

intervene, the veterans of the show delineate who is welcome: “freak women only” (“Blood Bath” 36:47). In the ensuing conversation, the women discuss what it means to live as a freak woman or a normal woman—the part of “normal” being argued by a young, able-bodied white woman who speaks only of what more the freak women could lose. It is following this conversation that Penny explicitly names herself as “The Amazing Lizard Girl,” claiming her place among the freak show performers, and it is through this claim that she allows her father to live. It is in the place of community that Penny, “The Amazing Lizard Girl”, moves beyond a need for revenge and finds a place of acceptance both for who she chooses to love, Paul, and for the scarring on her skin. As long as scars are inflicted on some bodies as marks of difference there will be communities that come together around that marking: communities that begin to undo that violence.

The visibility or invisibility of scars works to explore potential futures, potential communities, and potential persecution. In a scene where Dell—fraught with guilt for his murder of Ma Petite and fear for his sexuality being exposed—is preparing to hang himself, he has a conversation with the ghost of Ethel. Dell questions how Ethel and the other performers of the freak show can handle life, being different. Ethel responds, “We wear our shame on the outside, there’s no hiding it. It’s just who we are” (“Tupperware Party Massacre” 29:01). Here, Ethel highlights the healing potential of the scar. These markings unite the performers through a shared narrative: the tangible scars that speak to past wounding, present stigma, and an indeterminate future of potential violence and potential community.

The branding of *American Horror Story* reconjures historical affective wounding through scarring, gruesomely emphasizing its presence through violence. The violence of the show demonstrates wounding events which leave marks on living bodies and which collect those bodies after death in un-consenting communities of spectacle. The violence and casting of the show demonstrate that which is clearly missing: the racial and disabled origins of the freak shows upon which the season is based. Thinking through scar reminds us not to look away from violence as we consider communities formed in the assemblage of identities of disability and race. The scar is a place where these aspects of identity can communicate and form community without being flattened into a single perspective. The scar’s ability to exist

within multiple temporalities and locations allows it the flexibility needed to provide a space for community and healing without narratives of progress.

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