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Disability History: An American Horror Story

Introduction

Throughout United States history, individuals with disabilities have often faced profound discrimination and misunderstanding, marginalized by societal attitudes, systemic issues and the dominant ideologies in American society. Such maltreatment and ignorance has manifested itself in many ways, two of which are seen in the history of freak shows and institutionalization of disabled people. The former was an integral part of American entertainment culture starting in the 19th century, where performers (mostly disabled) were exploited by managers and gawked at by the public as the only means of viable employment (Clare & Spade, 2009). Regarding the latter, people deemed miscreant by society—the disabled, criminals, feeble-minded, sexual perverts, to name a few—were subjected to eugenic ideology through forced sterilization and institutionalization in order to protect the social fabric of American society (Nielsen, 2012). The show *American Horror Story* has two seasons in which it touches on both of these histories: *Freak Show* and *Asylum*. The season *Freak Show* takes place in Florida, 1952 and is about one of the last remaining freak shows in the United States on the brink of going out of business. *Asylum* centers around the fictional Briarcliff manor, an institution for the mentally disabled where abuse, ableism, and exploitation are rampant. Despite the show focusing on aspects of horror such as spirits and serial killers, these two seasons incorporate accurate historical retellings of the societal and systemic treatment of individuals with disabilities during this time period. As such, this essay will discuss how *Freak Show* depicts how disabled performers simultaneously were made spectacles yet flaunted their disabilities and how the medicalization of disability coincided with the decline of freak shows; and how *Asylum* portrayed the medicalization and treatment of disability, as well as the distorted explanations for its etiology.

Freak Show: Spectacles vs. Voyeurism

Freak shows were places where disabled performers simultaneously flaunted their disabilities for their advantage, but were still made spectacles by the public (Clare & Spade, 2009). Historically, the term freak in the context of freak shows was used in a pejorative manner in order to reference humans deemed exotic, deformed and abnormal. Such shows were places where the general public went to gawk at the “freaks” in order to strengthen ideas of their normality and superiority versus the performers’ abnormality and inferiority (Clare & Spade, 2009). However, instead of harboring shame or embarrassment surrounding their disabilities, the “freaks” actually flaunted them as part of their performance.

American Horror Story’s season of *Freak Show* accurately demonstrates this duality of being made a spectacle of versus flaunting disabilities through performance. For example, Elsa

Mars, the owner of the freak show depicted in *American Horror Story* claims that the real monsters are the people outside the show tents. She asserts that they are stupefied with boredom, and that the performers feel pity for them because of their uneventful lives and how they long for exotic wonders. The “freaks” are a way to give the world what they want, by offering their oddity to the world (Murphy et al., 2015). Such a perspective simultaneously places the audience in an inferior position, painting them as the ones having a deficit in their lives, while showcasing the disabled performers as remarkable with something valuable to offer the public. It is clear that they not only flaunt their disabilities as wonders to be seen, but they also make a spectacle of their audience by seeing them as objects to be pitied and exploited. This victimization of the audience is historically accurate as well, where the “freaks” and their managers worked together to financially scam and abuse the public (Clare & Spade, 2009). Thus, even though the freak show performers were consistently made spectacles and labeled abnormal by the audience, they did not adopt the mentality themselves as being victims and instead showed their agency by flaunting their disabilities and exploiting the audience back.

Moreover, in addition to the voyeurism of the disabled performers, the season *Freak Show* also depicts the many ways the “freaks” are discriminated against and made into spectacles. In the show, conjoined twins Bette and Dot Tattler are murder suspects who flee detainment with the encouragement of Elsa Mars, and are recruited to join her freak show. A detective attempts to arrest them in the camp, saying “Look at them, they’re monsters. The jury will have no problem seeing that” (Murphy et al., 2015). He further claims it wouldn’t be hard to believe if they were responsible for the other murders in town too. Despite Bette and Dot only being suspects at this point, it is clear that the detective already assigns blame to them, strongly influenced by their appearance. Since their disability is foreign to the detective, it provokes such a strong uncomfortability that it is easiest to label them as monsters, and apply the associations of a monster onto them. He alludes to the fact that the string of murders in town might also be their doing, showcasing his and society’s affinity at this time to associate disability with monstrosity, and thus evil acts. In the show we can also briefly see this fear and aversion to difference within the “freak” community. When Bette and Dot first arrived at the freak show camp, Dot claims she is surrounded by a cesspool of creatures and expresses her disdain for a lady with a beard (Murphy et al., 2015). Dot is clearly “othering” and making a spectacle of the disabled performers, despite her condition being seen as abnormal in society as well. This could serve to illustrate how pervasive ableism was in the roots of society, where Dot seems to have internalized this notion herself.

Freak Show: The Medicalization of Disability

Freak shows were historically prominent and successful because disabled people were seen as exotic, extraordinary and sub-human (Clare & Spade, 2009). They were gawked at in wonder rather than looked at as humans with conditions. Thus, the transition into the medicalization of disability came about when doctors began linking their “freakishness” to actual

pathology. This meant that disabled people were then viewed as pitiful, tragic, and suffering from afflictions. Such ideology led to the decline in the freak show as an industry because all of the exotic wonder was replaced with pity, so voyeurism was no longer morally acceptable.

American Horror Story's season of *Freak Show* hints at such medicalization of disability and its link to the decline of the freak show industry. Canonically, Elsa Mars' show is one of the few surviving freak shows in the United States in the 1950s, where she is struggling to keep the business alive. In addition to the narrative surrounding the performers, the show also includes insight into the medical and science community. One scene takes place at the American Morbidity Museum, reminiscent of the Mutter Museum in Philadelphia (where this fictional museum is coincidentally located as well), where there are many specimens and disabled bodies on display. The tour guide discusses the "horrors of disease, disorder and death of these poor souls" (Murphy et al., 2015). The curiosity and amazement is clearly replaced with pity and disgrace towards the impairments of the specimens. Even after death, these disabled individuals are continuously made into spectacles, but it has transitioned into feelings of sadness for their unfortunate situations. Moreover, one onlooker of the specimens said "...they were losers in life. At least now they have some value" (Murphy et al., 2015). This further demonstrates the medicalization of disability because they are insinuating that disabled bodies only have value in the context of medicine and science. They are automatically assumed to be inherently incapable in life, and only become useful when they can contribute to society through the procurement of knowledge. Furthermore, the collection of specimens in jars and labeling them with just their impairments strips away these people's humanity and stories (Chicago Humanities Festival, 2014). One way in which American Horror Story subtly pushes back against the unempathetic exhibition of body parts in museums like this is by having this fictional museum include some portraits of the individuals along with their specimens. This acts to restore some dignity and humanity by reminding the public that each of these individuals has a narrative that should not be forgotten.

Asylum: Distorted Explanations for Disability and Treatment

In the early 20th century, ideas of eugenics were prominent in the United States, specifically surrounding traits deemed socially inadequate (Nielsen, 2012). Such classes included the feeble-minded, the insane, criminals, and disabled just to name a few. Eugenic ideas deemed these traits to be heritable, and a threat to the fabric of society, so many individuals with these labels were forcibly sterilized to prevent procreation, or forced into institutions to segregate the miscreants from the healthy national body. However, around the 1950s there were reform movements surrounding the possibilities for those with disabilities: focusing on efforts to improve conditions in institutions, creating opportunities for work and education, and standing against the idea that disabled individuals cannot be helped (*Parallels In Time | A History of Developmental Disabilities | Part One*).

In American Horror Story's *Asylum*, the narrative within Briarcliff Manor takes place in 1964 (during the reformation period) implementing ideas from both the eugenics era and

reformation period. To begin, much like the eugenics movement was falsely using ideologies of science to understand the etiology of disability, in *Asylum* they also falsely used a prominent ideology to explain the underpinnings of mental illness: religion. In one scene, a woman diagnosed as a nymphomaniac was having her hair shaved as a punishment for an indiscretion, and the head nun, Sister Jude, claimed that “mental illness is the fashionable explanation for sin” (Murphy et al., 2015). The Sister stated that madness is a spiritual crisis stemming from the absence of god and that the only way to cure the diseased mind is through the three P’s: productivity, prayer and purification. Clearly, the understanding of mental illness at Briarcliff Manor is entirely rooted in religion, specifically straying away from God. This perspective completely and irresponsibly neglects scientific theory, even though the state of psychiatry in the 1960s was already considering biological and socio-environmental causes of mental illness (*Historical Perspectives on the Theories, Diagnosis, and Treatment of Mental Illness* | *British Columbia Medical Journal*). This religious idea of etiology as well as the proposed treatment implies individual blame for the condition—it suggests that if the person in question was productive, virtuous and pure, they would not be afflicted with mental illness. Despite this shortcoming, the fact that this institution was suggesting a treatment is partially reflective (yet misguided) of the reformation period that encouraged supporting and providing treatment to disabled individuals rather than succumbing to the idea that disabled people simply needed to be kept away from the public.

Asylum: The Medicalization of Disability

Despite religious attitudes being dominant in Briarcliff Manor, the season does showcase some of the medical and scientific investigations of mental illness. For example, Dr. Arden, the atheist physician and administrator of the asylum, cut out and examined the brains of patients with “dark psyches” in order to understand such minds (Murphy et al., 2015). He kidnapped, experimented and killed vulnerable patients against their will in order to conduct his experiments, and showcased their brains in jars in his laboratory. This demonstrates the medicalization of disability through his belief that mental illness is neurologically based, although his methods are twisted, perverted and unethical. Dr. Arden is clearly exploitative since his subjects are exclusively people with disabilities—the individuals that society has cast aside and wouldn’t notice if they have gone missing. Moreover, the brains in jars are only labeled with subject IDs—numbers and letters—further erasing the identities of these individuals even after death.

Conclusion

It’s clear that individuals with disabilities have prominently faced many brutal and abusive injustices at the hands of the societal and systemic underpinnings of American society. Analyzing the histories of freak shows and institutionalization is just one front in which we can see ableist and eugenic ideologies come to light. American Horror Story’s *Freak Show* and *Asylum* provide a poignant portrayal of the historical treatment of individuals with disabilities in

the United States in the 19th and 20th centuries. These seasons discuss important historical topics such as the medicalization of disability, making disabled individuals into spectacles, and how disabled people have persevered through these trying times. Such an analysis not only sheds light on a dark chapter of American history, but it also prompts one to reflect on contemporary attitudes and practices towards disabled individuals, allowing us to work towards a more inclusive and equitable society.

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