

Telling national stories in American Horror Story

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Introduction: Telling National Stories in *American Horror Story*
Harriet Earle and Jessica Clark

What does it mean for something to be 'American'? Naturally, the nature of such labelling is highly subjective. One man may talk of 'American' values and cite 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness'; another may consider American values to be the right to free speech, to bear arms or the duty to stand for the anthem and pledge allegiance daily. There is no right answer because there is no unified 'American' identity. As a native Southerner, one writer of this introduction has very little in common with a New Yorker, a Californian or someone from the Pacific Northwest, besides her passport. As a Brit, the co-author does not identify as American, and relies on educational knowledge, news media and cultural imagery to understand 'American-ness'. The markers of American identity are intersectional, multitudinous and as dependent on location and personal experience as any other marker of identity and understanding. Indeed, with the widening gap between political parties and the continued focus on local identity, the notion of a unified 'American way' is becoming an impossibility. More so now that at any other time in American history, the term 'American' has very little concrete meaning; despite the continued usage of 'making America great again' as political rhetoric. Legal experts in trademarks and copyright would call it a 'weak mark' – it has too many varied meanings for it to be able to convey one idea. In 2017, it may appear that the only types of people to use the term 'America' were those who were using it to invoke right-wing ideologies and (often) racist or 'anti-foreigner' sentiments. Often, this type of nation-naming was rebranded as 'Murica' and accompanied by an image of a stereotypical redneck; it was not unusual to see this colloquial spelling paired with the confederate flag, especially after the 'Unite the Right' rally in Charlottesville in August 2017. Of course, such national pride is not a twenty-first century phenomenon.

In his 1840 treatise *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville discusses the bold patriotism of the American people, suggesting it was a product of a working democracy. His comments were not all positive, however, and he famously goes on to write that, 'One cannot imagine a more disagreeable and talkative patriotism. It fatigues even those who honor it' (2003: 585). In the controversial and politically charged introduction to his 1923 book *Studies in Classic American Literature*, D. H. Lawrence berates the reader for believing the American who tells him 'the lie you expect' (1990: 9). Americans did not, in fact, move in search of religious freedom and America is not the land of the free:

This the land of the free! Why, if I say anything that displeases them, the free mob will lynch me, and that's my freedom. Free? Why, I have never been in any country where the individual has such an abject fear of his fellow countrymen. Because, as I say, they are free to lynch the moment he shows he is not one of them (1990: 9).

Any suggestion of America's founding narrative of religious and intellectual freedom is, for Lawrence, completely untrue. Indeed, one only has to consider the tight grip that evangelical Christianity has on the political status quo to see the contemporary ramifications of his point. For de Tocqueville and Lawrence – and for many millions of contemporary Americans – the *idea* of America is the thing. The truth of the nation matters very little as long as the image of Americanism and 'American values', whatever they may be, is upheld. 'America' as a unified ideal exists as discourse, in the minds of her citizens and each citizen's ideal is different. De Tocqueville describes this perfectly when he writes: 'Two things in America are astonishing: the changeableness of most human behavior and the strange stability of certain principles. Men are constantly on the move, but the spirit of humanity seems almost unmoved' (2003, 708).

And yet the term is consistently and regularly used in the names of corporations and businesses to denote their allegiance (no matter how tenuous) to a blanket understanding of Americanness. Furthermore, it is widely used in television and cinema to denote some kind of culturally indicative experience. *American Beauty* is not a film about an ordinary man going through a midlife crisis, it's about the typical American 50-year-old's quest to rediscover himself and battle the ennui of middle age. *American Pie* is not a high school comedy in which young men act in a variety of (in)appropriate ways, desperate to lose their virginity, it's about the experience of all high school age boys and their sexual maturation and identities. *American Sniper* is not about Chris Kyle and his impressive, yet controversial, military career, it's about the position of the American military and their superiority in the international theatre of war. It is through these cultural documents that the image of 'America' remains cemented in international cultural memory.

Since its first airing in October 2011, *American Horror Story* (henceforth *AHS*) has moved through seven seasons, 60 awards, over 250 nominations and a huge amount of critical debate. The premise of the show is simple. Each season revolves around a trope or theme common to the horror genre, with a cast of characters taken from both stock figures and

historical personages. The common thread running through each season is the appearance of these historical figures who, without exception, are taken from the dark and depraved parts of American history, including serial murder, slavery, witchcraft, folklore and cultic violence. Many of these characters have significant roles within the narratives. For example, in *AHS: Asylum*, Anne Frank appears as a character, alongside a fictionalised Dr Mengele and a young woman named Grace Bertrand, who is heavily based on Lizzie Borden; *AHS: Coven* focuses on New Orleans, with fictionalised versions of 'voodoo priestess' Marie Laveau and sadistic socialite Delphine LaLaurie, as well as including many references to both New Orleans voodoo practice and the Salem witch trials; the most recent season, *AHS: Cult*, bolsters the main storyline with interludes into a number of infamous American cult narratives, including the mass suicide at Jonestown in 1978, the Manson family murders in 1969 and the 1993 ATF siege of the Branch Davidian compound in Waco. Of all seven seasons to date, the first season is the only one that does not necessarily engage with the cultural and political climate of the time; the more recent seasons are increasingly bold in their political leanings and the seventh season actively engages with the 2016 American Presidential Election, Donald Trump's win, and subsequent inauguration, going so far as to use footage of his speeches and rallies.

What is 'American' about *American Horror Story*? As previously mentioned, many of the characters in each season of *AHS* are fictionalised versions of historical figures. The type of historiography *AHS* employs creates a gruesome patchwork of the most interesting and degenerate parts of American public history, the parts of American life that horrify and titillate. The narrative of America that is created takes its cues from a cultural obsession with crime and depravity. This may well be to be expected for a horror television programme but also, what are we to make of the use of real people and indeed places, for the development of an entirely fictional storyline? This is not a technique that is unique to *AHS* but has been used to great effect in a wide range of texts, most notably E.L. Doctorow's 1975 novel *Ragtime*. Doctorow weaves historical figures into his fictional narrative and allows real and fictional characters to interact freely. Fredric Jameson claims that *Ragtime* is a clear example of how 'the historical novel can no longer set out to represent the historical past; it can only 'represent' our ideas and stereotypes about that past [...] We are condemned to seek History by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history, which itself remains forever out of reach' (1991: 25). The use of these real figures in *AHS* connects it to the wider narrative of America's dark history while allowing the audience to be complicit in the development of the

plot; without the American cultural obsession with the dark and depraved, *AHS* would not work.

It is not only the use of historical figures but also the way their fame (or infamy) is characterised. Let's consider this briefly in relation to a scene from the fourth episode of *AHS: Hotel*, 'Devil's Night'. At a dinner party in a Los Angeles hotel, a well-dressed man is making a toast to his assembled friends. He raises a glass of champagne, turns to the company and says:

Thank you all for being here on Devil's Night, but it is I who should be the one celebrating you. I look around and I see the definition of American success. They write books about you. Make movies of your life. Years after your death, people continue to be enthralled. You've made your mark in history. Like the *Iliad*, your stories will live on forever. I consider you all my equals ('Devil's Night', 2015).

This could be a scene from any gathering of successful people in Los Angeles (or indeed the world). The company is not made up of illustrious businessmen, but of the ghosts of American serial killers. The toaster similarly is a murderer – James March, a composite character based heavily on 19th century Chicago-based serial killer H.H. Holmes. This scene is a microcosm of the entire series, which uses historical figures known for their violence and criminality to create a cultural artefact that writes a narrative of America, probing the country's darker side in a series of storylines that play on the infamy of 'real life' figures and a particularly gruesome representation of public history. James March's toast suggests that serial killers are heroes on a par with cast of the Greek epics, their acts are achievements of great skill to be admired. The most important thing about this group is that it is made up of *actual* serial killers, whose crimes are well-known and, with the exception of one, were tried and convicted for them.

The assembled company is not named immediately. When the episode opens, we see a Latino man checking into the hotel. He has a symbol drawn on the palm of his hand and often extends his hand to display it. To any 'serial killer buff' he is instantly recognisable as Richard Ramirez, the 'Night Stalker'. Later, a woman approaches the bar dressed in masculine clothing, her dirty blonde hair regularly tossed in a gesture that identifies her as Aileen Wuornos, who was convicted of seven murders and was executed in 2002. These two ghosts are guests at a special dinner party in which all the guests are either dead, killers or both. Also present are Jeffrey Dahmer (a quiet, solidly-built young man in recognisable large-framed glasses), John Wayne Gacy (who dons his clown make-up during the party) and the Zodiac (as this person was never caught and their identity remains a mystery, they appear in *AHS: Hotel* as a black-clad figure in a mask with the Zodiac symbol drawn on their chest). It is only as the party draws to a close that the characters are named. The writers of *AHS: Hotel* expect us to know

these figures and we are given a great deal of clues as to the identity of each one. Their appearances are taken from the most famous photographs of each one and, in the case of Wuornos and Ramirez, they become inextricably linked to gestures that became a part of their 'public face'.

This scene would not work if these figures were not instantly recognisable. Even when each character is named, by an emotionally unsettled John, and their crimes briefly described, the amount that is left out is considerable. The viewer is expected to know these figures and their histories. They are known; as March says, they have a great deal of books written about them, their lives are made into films and yes, years later the public is still enthralled. By the contemporary definition of fame, they are the epitome. The fact, not only that we want to follow these individuals, but the level of engagement we have with their stories, suggests that we are complicit in their fame. It is the public consumption of serial killers that drives their success: they are the 'definition of American success' because they, like social media and reality television stars, have harnessed the power of the media and the public to drive their rise to fame, as Brian Jarvis and David Schmid have both argued. Indeed, in many ways the serial killer is the ultimate American celebrity. Born out of a heady cocktail of neoliberal individualism, exceptionalism and the uniquely American myth of 'regeneration through violence', which, according to Richard Slotkin, is the central myth of the hunter and 'one of self-renewal or self-creation through acts of violence' (1973: 556). Based on Slotkin's formulation, the myth of the hunter continues to evolve throughout American society into the present day, now reborn in the figure of the predatory killer.

The inclusion of these micronarratives into the wider national narrative put forward by *AHS: Hotel* makes clear I.Q. Hunter's point that 'the serial killer is an all too irresistible, at times suspiciously frictionless, metaphor of America and American culture' (1996: 120). As the serial killer is a central part of the dark public history from which *AHS* selects its characters, it follows that the series would place them in the cast of characters meant to represent this particular type of 'Americanness'. So, how is this term perceived? We posit there are two ways to view the use of 'American' in the title of *AHS* (and indeed all cultural products that use it): it is either isolationist or inclusivist. Of course, these are opposing options, so we will explain each in turn. The first way is to suggest that the use of 'American' as a national label for these narratives is inclusivist. On the most basic level, to label something is to define it against everything that it is not; to speak in Derridan terms we are drawing meaning from reciprocal determination, a key aspect of *différance*.¹ If 'American' is

defined against any other national identity, it not only draws clearly defined parameters for any stories that will influence the series, but it also removes any ambiguity or multi-dimensionality from our understanding of these stories. It removes the intersectional nuance of race, gender and class from each narrative, instead asking us to see it as a blanketed 'national' story instead (despite the fact that issues of race, disability, gender and class lie at the heart of many of the series' narratives). Furthermore, it suggests that the story itself is plucked from the very soil on which it is told. If we consider season six, *Roanoke*, this could not be further from the truth. The story of the original Roanoke settlers begins in England, with a group of English settlers leaving under the sanction of Elizabeth I, in the hope of creating a permanent English settlement in American colonies. The importance of England to this story is compounded by the fact that it was only because supplies ran out that John White, husband of *AHS's* 'Butcher', left the settlement; the subsequent threat of starvation forced the remaining colonists to abandon their homes. The story of the lost Roanoke colony is a transnational one. Similarly, the person of Marie Laveau (season three, 'Coven') may be a central figure in the mythology of New Orleans – and a native American – but the voodoo magic she uses is a pastiche of traditions taken from the African diaspora, Louisiana Creole French and Roman Catholicism. Louisiana Voodoo is distinct from the more famous Haitian Vodou, although both have much in common. Marie Laveau is a figure constructed from a range of distinct cultural and spiritual traditions. To consider her – or indeed any of the complex and culturally diverse characters – as solely 'American' is to fail to address the wide range of influences on both the individuals at hand and the country itself. This way of looking at the use of 'American' ties in with both Exceptionalism (the belief that America is a nation entirely unlike any other) and Manifest Destiny (the belief that the country is rightfully settled by westward movement of European immigrants). For De Toqueville,

The position of the Americans is quite exceptional, and it may be believed that no democratic people will ever be placed in a similar one. Their strictly Puritanical origin, their exclusively commercial habits, even the country they inhabit, which seems to divert their minds from the pursuit of science, literature, and the arts, the proximity of Europe, which allows them to neglect these pursuits without relapsing into barbarism, a thousand special causes, of which I have only been able to point out the most important, have singularly concurred to fix the mind of the American upon purely practical objects (2003, 657).

This view clusters all narratives that are linked with the American continent together, creating a national tapestry of stories that is entirely inward-looking and negates any of the

rich inter- and transnational bonds in the forging of American identity and the understanding of what it means to be American in the contemporary world.

The other way to view the use of this term in the title is to see it as inclusivist, highlighting the commonality of narrative themes across all hyphenated identities, to create a unified American identity. This way of viewing the Americanness of *AHS* is closely aligned to the concept of the American melting pot. But does this allow the richness and diversity of hyphenated American identity to be adequately represented? Let us consider the character of Queen in *AHS: Coven*. Queenie is an African-American witch among Caucasian witches at Miss Robichaux's Academy. Her identity as a witch is complicated by her claim that she is a descendent of Tituba, the slave woman who may or may not have provoked a group of young Caucasian women to engage in what was perceived as witchcraft just before the start of the Salem Witch Trials in 1692. Her fellow witches claim lineage to the witches executed in Salem. Not only is Tituba's ethnicity and identity a matter of debate (see D. Downey's article) but so is her place within Salem. In this respect, she has much in common with Queenie. In an attempt to understand her own racial identity, Queenie leaves Miss Robichaux's to stay with Marie Laveau, the African-American voodoo priestess. Here we see further complication. Queenie, who claims lineage to a woman who may have been Native American, African or South American, is now affiliated to a Caribbean-American woman and a type of magic that brings together a mix of cultural practices. In Queenie, we see the coming together of contrasting and (for the most part) incompatible identities. To call her purely 'American' is to erase her complexity and that of her ancestors. Another example of the curious erasure posed by the blanket idea of 'American' is Liz Taylor. A trans woman, who works in the Hotel Cortez in *AHS: Hotel*, Liz's past as a white, heterosexual and 'traditionally masculine' man is shown in flashback throughout the season. To consider her 'American' would be to erase the long and complex history of trans representation and discrimination in the USA. Although she is not an example of the complexities of racial identity, the trans community is not part of the 'American norm' and, as such, Liz does not fit with the default heteronormative American citizen. To conflate Liz's understanding of her identity with that of a cissexual character is to negate the tremendously important history of oppression of queerness in the US and the ramifications of that oppression. Indeed, as recent political events, including Donald Trump's infamous 'Transgender Military Ban' have shown, such acts of silencing and oppression are not confined to some obscure past, but remain a daily struggle.

It is not just the people but the familiarity of 'American' places that marks out *AHS* as rich for analysis. "Film and television act as maps for the everyday social-cultural and geopolitical imaginaries and realities of everyday life" (Lukinbeal 2004:247). This social cartography of meaning creation (Bruno 2002) highlights the sites of *AHS* – the Roanoke Colony, New Orleans, Hotel Cortez, etc. - not just as places where character narratives play out but as spaces with stories, heritage and 'American-ness' in their own right; their narratives inextricably entwined with those of the characters. Hotel Cortez is loosely based on both the murder castle from urban legends surrounding the American serial killer H.H. Holmes and the Cecil Hotel in downtown Los Angeles famed for its violent and suicidal history. It is both the figures that come to the serial killer dinner and the site where it is held that mark it as intriguing commentary on violence and American history. There are concerns that American popular culture functions as form of mega-brand (Anholt 2002) flattening the multiplicity of 'imagined worlds' (Appadurai 1996:33). However, *AHS* offers alternative, critical and subversive visions of what America was and is, that prompt considerations of how social divisions in political perspectives, race, gender, disability and age play out within historical and contemporary spaces. The connection of such spaces to folk tales, urban legends, historical events, real and fictional figures, and neo-colonial or divisive pasts and presents of North America, serves to further cement the appeal of *AHS* in the public imaginary and to intrigue academic attention. In this sense *AHS* (and visual media more broadly) is not just mere image but should be viewed as the "temporary embodiment of social processes that continually construct...the world as we know it" (Creswell and Dixon 2002:3).

The matter of labelling a media artefact of any kind as 'American' is complicated by the huge intricacies of the country itself and the 'weakness' of the American national brand. This special issue of *The European Journal of American Culture* contains six articles, each on a different aspect of *AHS*, discussing a diverse range of themes that appear within the series, including the legacy of Tituba and the position of the 'freak' in capitalist society and also many of the US-specific story elements that feature heavily, such as school shootings and the growth of sensationalist media. In her article, 'Tracing Tituba Through *American Horror Story: Coven*', Dara Downey delves further into Queenie and her ancestor Tituba. Downey offers a reading of both Queenie and the other characters in *AHS: Coven* to suggest that witchcraft is rarely Anglo-European in origin and, moreover, that the lack of consensus on the true person of Tituba renders her as 'other', a point of genealogical identity that offers no certainty and, thus,

only difference. Remaining with *AHS: Coven*, Jennifer O'Reilly interrogates the series' representation of Louisiana Voodoo and the character of Marie Laveau. Her article – “We're more than just pins and dolls and seeing the future in chicken parts”: Race, magic and religion in *American Horror Story: Coven* – not only argues that the representation of Voodoo turns it into spectacle but also posits a number of questions in relation to the hierarchy of race and religion in the USA.

Jocelyn Froese and Christina Fawcett shift the focus to *AHS: Asylum* in their article, ‘White Coat, White Alb, White Mic: Institutions of Truth in *American Horror Story: Asylum*. Focusing on three characters, each drawn from a different institution and each uniquely corrupt, they argue that *AHS: Asylum* illustrates the power of institutions and the inherent danger in ‘the greater good’. In “‘It's a filthy goddam helpless world’”: Tate Langdon, School Shooters and Killer Fandoms’, Shelley McMurdo probes the link between school shootings (notably Columbine) and the ‘Tumblr’ online true crime community as they relate to Tate Langdon, a central character in *AHS: Murder House*. McMurdo investigates the representation of Tate in relation to the Columbine shooters and the dialogue between real-life trauma and fictionalised representations.

For Stevi Costa in ‘*American Horror Story: Capital, Counterculture and the Freak*’, the freak is a complex figure who does not necessarily represent the utopian space of the ‘freaktopia’ but is a representation of a desire to escape from normative American social values. The dream of ‘freaktopia’ is however unsustainable and becomes mainstream. In the sole multi-season article of this issue, Freya Verlander closes this special issue with “‘You're certainly Edward Sexton with that Needle and Thread’”: Fantasies of the Sharing, Tearing and Wearing of the ‘Common Skin’ in *American Horror Story*’. Through her readings of the use of skin in *AHS*, Verlander offers a unique argument on the reformulation of ‘common skin’ that occurs through the destruction and repurposing of others’ skin.

The articles within this Special Issue thus encapsulate a diversity of approaches to understanding the issues and tropes of *AHS*. Here they grapple with the spaces and figures of horror as they are recycled, reinterpreted and refashioned within *AHS* narratives. The ‘American’ of *American Horror Story* is thus reinforced as slippery discursive imagery, far too readily deployed as simple and straightforward, when the narratives reveal the cultural motif of America to be complex, messy and undefinable.

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ⁱ See Derrida, J. *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1998).