

Fecha de recepción: 30 noviembre 2016  
Fecha de aceptación: 13 marzo 2017  
Fecha de publicación: 27 abril 2017  
URL: <http://oceanide.netne.net/articulos/art9-4.pdf>  
Oceánide número 9, ISSN 1989-6328

## Of Monsters and Men: Masculinities in HBO's *Carnivàle*<sup>1</sup>

Rubén PEINADO-ABARRIO  
(The University of Manchester, United Kingdom)

### RESUMEN:

La serie televisiva de HBO *Carnivàle* se enfrenta a la cuestión de la masculinidad como una metanarrativa que debe ser deconstruida, y lo hace a través de un reparto coral de intérpretes con y sin discapacidades. La serie muestra un grupo de masculinidades heterodoxas, dañadas, y/o incompletas, representadas por personajes autónomos y complejos como Samson, un hombre con enanismo, y Jonesy, un exjugador de baseball cuya rodilla está seriamente dañada. El sentimiento de hombría de estos dos personajes no parece afectado por lo que podría entenderse como trabas físicas, de manera que personifican modelos más positivos que la masculinidad tóxica de Stumpy, quien prostituye a su mujer y sus hijas, o Brother Justin, el malvado pastor metodista.

Sin embargo, la defensa que *Carnivàle* hace de formas de masculinidad generalmente percibidas como subordinadas encuentra ciertas limitaciones, tal como su rol secundario respecto a la línea argumental principal, centrada en dos hombres cercanos al paradigma hegemónico: el heroico y apolíneo Ben Hawkins, y su antagonista, el inquebrantable Brother Justin. Impulsados por el deseo heterosexual, Hawkins y Justin afianzan su posición en el orden patriarcal gracias a Sofie, cuya transición de lesbiana *butch* y huérfana de padre a amante heterosexual e hija confirma las conservadoras estrategias narrativas y representacionales a las que acaba por entregarse la serie. De esta manera, las políticas de género y sexuales que los personajes principales acaban por adoptar comprometen el potencial de *Carnivàle* para desafiar la heteronormatividad.

PALABRAS CLAVE: televisión, masculinidades, discapacidad, heteronormatividad, *carnivàle*

### ABSTRACT:

HBO television series *Carnivàle* addresses 'masculinity' as a meta-narrative to be deconstructed through its ensemble cast of characters, played by disabled and non-disabled performers. The series inventories a group of unorthodox, damaged, and/or incomplete masculinities, performed by autonomous and well-rounded characters such as Samson, a man with dwarfism, and Jonesy, the badly injured ex-baseball player. Their sense of manhood does not seem to be compromised by conceivably hindering physical features, and they embody more positive models than the able-bodied toxic masculinity of Stumpy, the barker who pimps out his wife and daughters, or Brother Justin Crowe, the evil Methodist minister.

Nevertheless, the show's celebration of forms of masculinity typically perceived as subordinate comes up against certain limitations, mainly their subservience to the central storyline led by two men closer to a hegemonic paradigm: Ben Hawkins, fair and young, and his antagonist, the physically and spiritually unyielding Brother Justin. Hawkins and Justin, unequivocally driven by heterosexual desire, are granted access to the patriarchal order by Sofie, whose transition from *butch* lesbian and paternal orphan to heterosexual lover and daughter confirms the show's retreat to conservative narrative and representational strategies. As a consequence, the normative gender and sexual politics finally embraced by the main characters somewhat compromise *Carnivàle*'s potential to destabilize heteronormativity.

KEYWORDS: television, masculinities, disability, heteronormativity, *carnivàle*

HBO American television series *Carnivàle* (2003-2005), created and executive produced by Daniel Knauf, subverts traditional notions of masculinity through its ensemble cast of characters played by disabled and non-disabled performers. Set in the Great Depression and produced and released after 9/11, *Carnivàle* renegotiates what it means to be a man in turbulent periods of the US national experience. With its catalogue of 'freaks', the series inventories a group of unorthodox, damaged, and / or incomplete masculinities. A number of recurring characters are physically disabled, such as the commander of the carnival, Samson, a man with dwarfism; his supervisor, Management, a triple amputee; the blind mentalist, Professor Lodz; and Jonesy, the badly injured ex-baseball player leader of the roustabouts. Other recurring characters include the mentally retarded Gabriel, the strongman with low IQ; and the freakish Gecko, the Lizard Man.

This article aims to show, on the one hand, how the script avoids the sensationalistic or superficial portrayal of persons with disabilities offering instead autonomous and well-rounded characters; and on the other hand, how the series' initial audacity and allegedly transgressive nature – regarding, among others, narrative linearity, gender representation, and sexual politics – eventually succumbs to the need to offer a product easier to read and digest by the audience. Ironically, this increasing conformity to mainstream standards did not prevent the early cancellation of the series after two seasons. In a show said to stage "the collapse of monolithic meta-narratives regarding religions, politics and social order" (Aloi and Johnston, 2015: 11), 'masculinity' becomes yet another meta-narrative to be deconstructed. I argue that such a process of deconstruction is rooted in the complex gender performance carried out by a number of disabled or impaired male characters<sup>2</sup> (namely, Samson and Jonesy) and one female character, Sofie, the card reader who communicates telepathically with her catatonic mother. *Carnivàle's* singularity relies to an extent on the way these characters transcend the limits of their physicality to perform different models of masculinity in ways rarely seen on commercial broadcasting.

#### 1. COMMUNITY, DISABILITY, AND MASCULINITY

One of the first scenes of the show presents the hero to be, Ben Hawkins, burying his

recently deceased mother shortly before meeting the carnival crew he is about to join. In this manner, the nature of the carnival as a surrogate family for him, and by extension, for all its members gets established. "People like us don't have nice families", declares Sofie (2.6)<sup>3</sup>, highlighting the need of the carnies to belong. Indeed, the carnival is presented as a community with rules outside mainstream society, defined by a strong code of ethics and its willingness to defend its members from external aggressions. Robert G. Weiner contends that the series portrays everyone as being equal socially, with teratological humans integrated within the small community of carnies (2015: 138). Although this inclusiveness evokes the American myth of the melting pot, the implication persists that the carnies are a tribe apart; as Cynthia Burkhead puts it, the "physical appearance of carnival freaks and the behaviors associated with all carnival workers keep the carnival outside of American social norms" (2015: 148-9).

From a gender perspective, this is a community that thrives, to some degree, on the victimization of women, a pattern also observed by both Susan Faludi and Judith Butler in their description of post-9/11 America. Faludi appraises the United States after the 2001 terror attacks as a place in which the state- and media-sponsored call for 'traditional' manhood has implied the relegation of women to supporting players in the national narrative (2007). Meanwhile, Butler denounces the appropriation of the feminist cause by the Bush administration as an excuse for its military actions against Afghanistan (2004: 41). In *Carnivàle*, the Dreifuss family provides the best example of male oppression, with Felix 'Stumpy' Dreifuss fulfilling the role of the master of ceremonies for the cootch-dancing routine of his wife, Rita Sue, and his two daughters, Libby and Dora Mae, and pimping them out in private sessions with carnival visitors. Indeed, the ideas of surrogate paternity and conflicting family relations establish the connection between the master plot – Ben Hawkins's quest for his father, and his coming to terms with his healing powers, which will lead to his confrontation with the villainous Brother Justin Crowe – and the American trope of father-son relationships and good-bad fathers, or at the very least, fathers who do not live up to the expectations<sup>4</sup>. The main exemplars of failed fatherhood are Henry Scudder, Ben's vanished father; Brother Justin, who fathered Sofie after raping Apollonia; and the already mentioned Stumpy. Given the nature of the series, it may come as a

surprise that all of them are able-bodied. But in *Carnivàle*, the performers of harmful masculinities are not necessarily defined by physical difference.

The show defies what Linton calls 'the medicalization of disability': "human variation [presented] as deviance from the norm, as pathological condition, as deficit, and, significantly, as an individual burden and personal tragedy" (1998: 11). In truth, the series' portrayal of male characters subverts what may be taken as a given – that in a world where men are defined as active, independent, doers, a physical disability inevitably erodes their sense of manhood. This work of fiction shares one of the goals of scholarship such as Wendy Jane Gagen's: to prove that disability is not necessarily emasculating (2007: 526). Neither Samson nor Jonesy seem to feel their masculinity compromised by conceivably hindering physical features; indeed, they embody more positive models than the non-disabled toxic masculinity of Stumpy, the heavy-drinking barker who unscrupulously pimps out his wife and daughters, or Brother Justin Crowe, a physical and mental abuser of women. What is more, Samson and Jonesy are truly independent characters – although in the hierarchy of the carnival, Management is supposed to rule over the two of them as the boss in the shadows.

In many ways, the carnies may be different from the visitors who pay a nickel for the show, but they are not helpless representatives of Great Depression America: "Despite the otherness of their social status (being comprised of physical 'freaks', ex-convicts, the physically-disabled and the mentally-deficient), the carnival community represents a comparative rarity at this time in American history: the gainfully employed" (Aloi, 2015: 31). The show thus complements John Steinbeck's canonical artistic representation of the material and ideological desperation of the 1930s, *The Grapes of Wrath*, which focused on the plight of the rural unemployed. The ambivalence of the role of disabilities in this context seems to reflect a historical reality. As Robert Bogdan reminds us, in the carnival "people with disabilities were presented in demeaning ways, in ways to promote fear and contempt, but they were also presented in ways that positively enhanced their status" (1990: viii). The high standing of Samson and Jonesy in their community suggests that, like many other non-normative characters, they are probably better off within than without the carnival.

There are two figures in *Carnivàle* which reflect, to my mind, the show's sophisticated approach to the categories of gender and sexuality. The first one is Management, the perfect embodiment of masculinity 'in danger': a powerful figure nowhere seen but everywhere felt, reminiscent of the Wizard of Oz, who disguises his weakness from others. His gender-ambiguous voice dictates the itinerary of the carnival from a trailer to which only Samson and Lodz have access, and he remains invisible to carnies and audience alike behind theatrical curtains. But when halfway through season two the curtains are raised, he is revealed as a triple amputee who soon dies at the hands of Ben Hawkins (2.7). Even more emblematic are the scenes in which two of the carnies, Jonesy in season one and Lila in season two, dare to enter his sanctuary to eventually find an empty receptacle (1.4, 2.11). These moments work as a metaphor for the imitative and performative nature of gender identity theorized by feminist scholars such as Judith Butler (2004b) and Lynne Segal (2008): a reality that comes into being only when performed – but a reality with strong social influence nonetheless.

The second figure has very little screen time or narrative weight, but it is also worth mentioning: the debt collector that harasses Stumpy to have his money back. We learn very little about him, except for two things: he fought in World War I, and a war injury rendered him impotent (2.8). However, he is able to freely confess his condition without having his stature as a menacing presence a bit diminished, in an excellent example of how non-abled bodies still retain power in *Carnivàle*. As Bruzzi (2005: 56-7) reminds us, it is the symbolic that is crucial, not the biological: the phallus rather than the penis. Therefore, important as physical conditions are, it is implied that to be a man is to be socially powerful, regardless of anatomical concerns.

In order to analyze the idiosyncratic ways in which masculinities materialize in *Carnivàle*, the main body of this article discusses in detail a number of male characters, namely the two principal disabled characters, Samson and Jonesy, the hero, Ben Hawkins, and the villain, Brother Justin. But as the discipline of masculinity studies makes abundantly clear, "far from being just about men, the idea of masculinity engages, inflects, and shapes everyone" (Berger, Wallis, and Watson, 1995: 7). That is why a biologically female character such as Sofie becomes at times a more fitting performer of masculinities

than most of her male counterparts. To its credit, the show does not turn Sofie into a parodic tomboy or butch. Unfortunately, the reading of the sexual politics of *Carnivàle* that will conclude this article unmasks the show's conservative view, which betrays the subversive approach sported by some of its first episodes. This involution, along with the show's untimely cancellation, attests to the difficulties in offering a mass-culture product that deviates from standard representations of gender and sexuality.

## 2. THE POSITIVE DISABILITY OF SAMSON AND JONESY

Following the credits of the pilot episode, the opening scene features a close up of a man breaking the fourth wall as he delivers an apocalyptic speech with biblical overtones. Although this man's is no regular face, it will not be clear until several minutes later that it belongs to a man with dwarfism<sup>5</sup>. This initial contact with Samson will prove problematic itself: as the regular viewer soon realizes, there is no apparent reason for Samson to be the one who delivers this extradiegetic speech – which in fact will be replicated in the opening for season two. The words of Meeuf come to mind: "popular media often make a spectacle of people with disability, relying on the image of physical difference to signify the bizarre, the surreal, or the grotesque" (2014: 208). But the scepticism aroused by such an esoteric representation and exploitation of the non-normative body is soon put to rest.

Not long after this introduction, the audience learns that Samson is the authentic leader of the title carnival, the main link between Management and the carnies, and the visible face of power within that community. As such, Samson is not presented as a dwarf but as an autonomous character that happens to be of short height. He refuses to be defined by his genetic condition; indeed, hardly any background information is provided, other than the fact that he used to work as a dwarf strongman and was married to another carnival performer, the Scorpion Lady, a woman with ectrodactyly. Thus, physical prowess – much as the dwarf strongman act was a circus stunt – and heterosexuality assert his claim to manhood beyond his non-normative physique. The carnival crew, disabled and non-disabled alike, acknowledge Samson's status and accept his authority. And so does the camera work, which avoids the high angle shots that would have accentuated the

height gap. It is not casual that the only two adults who crouch to talk to him are the villain of the show, Brother Justin (2.12), and Stroud, his cartoonishly evil henchman (2.5).

Whether driven by economic interest or sympathy for his team, Samson negotiates his identity as a paternal figure of authority, as stated in the episode that fully reveals his ascendancy over the crew, "Pick a Number" (1.6). The esoteric ritual of carnival justice, which includes a round of Russian roulette, is explored as the carnies yearn for retaliation after the murder of Dora Mae, one of the cootch dancers, in the ghost town of Babylon. Although the accused, a bar owner, is absolved (that is, he survives the game), the carnies demand that he is punished. However, Samson – with the support of Jonesy – stands his ground and prevents a lynching. But the episode concedes him a final chance to embody the patriarchal, retributive father: after forcing the rest of the crew to accept the verdict of fate, he delivers 'justice' by ruthlessly shooting the accused in his bar. Here and elsewhere, Samson is not afraid to act tough.

As part of his patriarchal prerogatives within the carnival, Samson's managerial goal is to keep his subordinates happy and ensure that the freak shows and related acts yield a profit. The relevance of Samson as head of the community becomes more explicit when the carnival is understood as a characteristic American institution rather than a rarity, as proposed by Cynthia Burkhead, according to whom "the traveling carnival in America is first a business. [...] The rides, the peep shows, the tarot readings are all a commodity in a capitalistic pursuit; thus, economically at least, the American carnival reinforces rather than inverts the norms of its culture" (2015: 142). Therefore, it seems fitting that a disabled but financially savvy male character manages this microcosm.

If the sphere of free enterprise secures the place of Samson as show businessman in a genealogy of American archetypical figures, the world of sports marks Jonesy as a recognizable male specimen. Jonesy is a former baseball star forced into retirement when the mobsters he refused to collaborate with crippled his right knee with a baseball bat (1.6). Due to the scarce background information we are provided with, it may be assumed that the carnival has given him the opportunity to find a job – leading the roustabouts and operating the Ferris wheel. But Jonesy's previous life

is never fully forgotten. A show so stepped into history as *Carnivàle* does not fail to refer to the mythical stature of baseball legend Babe Ruth as a God-chosen popular hero of the time (1.2). In the carnival, Jonesy plays that role: the athlete, and more specifically, that quintessential American folklore hero, the baseball player. This connection is recurrently reinforced: in his first appearance (1.1), he helps Ben Hawkins fight the force of an increasingly mechanized society by throwing a stone to the operator sent by the bank to bulldoze Ben's house. In subsequent episodes, the bond between Jonesy and Sofie forms as they are throwing a baseball back and forth (1.8) or simply pitching stones (1.9), in moments of confession and communion which bring to mind stereotypical images of fathers and sons in American popular culture. Like Charles Foster Kane's snowball, a baseball calls up Jonesy's irretrievable pastoral past (2.3). When he faces what seems to be an imminent death, it is his younger self playing baseball that he pictures mentally (2.9).

All in all, Jonesy is hardly perceived to be an incapacitated man. Despite his limp, he does well enough in his role as one of the leaders of the carnival. If the carnies respect Samson's leadership and wit – to which his frequently enigmatic countenance and behavior contribute – the laborers see in Jonesy one of them: a plain, hardworking man happy to drink, dance, and fight. Furthermore, he has a number of women competing for his attention – from Sofie to Libby, along with Rita Mae, who will only refer to him as “a cripple” when driven by jealousy (2.10). As Gagen contends, “there is a possibility for those traditionally seen as emasculated to display or ‘positively’ support hegemonic masculinity” (2007: 538). It may be noted, though, that Jonesy's limp is the only significant physical barrier to a canonical masculinity: he is tall and has a strong, muscular body the camera repeatedly lingers on. Unlike Samson and his uneven features, Jonesy has a well-proportioned face, on which his square jaw puts the finishing touch. However, Jonesy's accepted and valued features may not be enough to counterbalance the toxic qualities that represent the reversal of a positive hegemonic model, mainly the sexist impulse that impels him to blame Sofie for being sexually assaulted (1.1) or to attempt to change Libby's ways when they marry (2.8).

Interestingly, regarding his impairment, Jonesy's narrative becomes the kind of overcome story rejected and denounced

by disability studies scholars and activists (Aguiló, 2013: 31; Minich, 2010: 46). Late in season two, a man who had lost his wife in a Ferris wheel accident has Jonesy tarred and feathered and beaten to an inch of his life. Ben comes to his aid and uses his supernatural abilities to heal his wounds, but it is when Jonesy realizes that his injured knee has also been fixed that he becomes ecstatic with joy (2.9). Recently married and able-bodied, Jonesy and his masculinity seem to be restored for good<sup>6</sup>. Despite this controversial aspect of Jonesy's narrative arc, it would be unfair to bar Jonesy from the community of men able to successfully perform in society despite impairments or disabilities. The storylines of Samson and Jonesy exemplify both the show's celebration of forms of masculinity typically perceived as subordinate and the limitations against which this approach comes up. In the final episodes of season two, with the show seeking to tie up the arch-narrative of good vs. evil<sup>7</sup>, the role of these unconventional figures is more subservient than ever to the central storyline led by two enlightened, abled men, closer to a hegemonic paradigm: the casually heroic Ben Hawkins, fair and young, and his antagonist, the physically and spiritually unyielding Brother Justin.

### 3. THE NORMATIVE MANHOOD OF BEN AND JUSTIN

Ben's masculinity and his appointment as exemplary hero is better understood in the context of the “self-conscious cult of inarticulate masculine heroism” which, according to Connell (2002: 252), defines narrative patterns of genres such as the Western. “I ain't much for talking” (1.2), Ben declares early on in *Carnivàle*. The longer he stays on screen, the more he proves to be adept at fulfilling the role of the not particularly burly but strong-willed, silent type, an individualistic young man who eventually does what is right for him and his community. In a narrative of self-fulfilled prophecy that seems to echo the mythical construction of America itself, Ben resorts to his mystical powers in order to stand up against the evil embodied by his nemesis, Brother Justin. Despite his slow adaptation to the ways of the traveling carnival and its people, in due course Ben sports the nobility suggested by his last name – at any rate, the hawk is only one step away from the eagle, the US national symbol. It also bears mentioning the origin of the name Benjamin as ‘the rightful son’, which contrasts with Brother Justin's self-proclamation as left hand of God (1.8, 2.12). In a thinly veiled allegory



of World War II, Justin's populist appeal and the cult of personality that gains momentum one episode after another resonate with the rise of Fascism in the years covered by the narration. A fresh and rightful source of power, embodied by Ben, will be needed to confront it. The fate of the entire humanity is linked to the destiny of these two characters, as suggested by the prophetic dreams that compare their clash with the then unknown atom bomb (2.1).

Nevertheless, before both Ben and the audience perceive the real dimension of his mission, the protagonist's personal quest for his estranged father provides the backbone of the story. The Oedipal problematic around which much of the series revolves materializes in Ben's barely justified search of Henry Scudder. Of Ben's family background we learn through the initial scenes of the pilot and a number of recurrent flashbacks, which offer glimpses of his lone mother rejecting her son because of what she takes to be a curse: his mysterious power. The supernatural talent to heal and raise the dead justifies the occasional depiction of Ben as a saintly figure above earthly concerns and desires – incidentally, the carnival will try to profit from it through the stunt "Benjamin St. John" (1.3, 2.12). This divine side notwithstanding, he instinctively grasps the need to fight for the preservation of his masculinity. For example, when the leader of a group of rednecks he meets in the woods during one of his wanderings threatens Ben's sense of manhood by pretending to rape him in the mouth, Ben retorts in a rage: "I'll kill you for that" (2.4). After all, Ben's initial asexuality does not conceal his unequivocal adherence to a patriarchal heteronormativity.

Season one opens with Ben burying his mother and joining the itinerant life of the carnival to become a kind of Odysseus; he is driven by no Ithaca but a desire to find his father. A number of episodes, such as "Alamogordo, NM" (2.2) or "Creed, OK" (2.5), follow the narrative device of showing Ben as a restless character, on the road, looking for clues about Scudder's whereabouts, knocking on doors, recruiting performers for the carnival, while trying to negotiate who he is and the nature of his unfathomable potential. Thus, the trauma of his 'gift' (exemplified by the recurring vision of a young Ben bringing back to life a dead cat much to the horror of his mother) adds up to the trauma of the lost father. Ben is

propelled by the patriarchal instinct that inevitably links him with a father he never came to know but whose male sanction he longs for; not surprisingly, one of Ben's few reproaches once their paths meet in season two is: "You left me alone with a crazy woman" (2.7). The father-son reunion will be cut short by Justin, who facilitates Ben's emancipation from the influence of the father by kidnapping and decapitating Scudder (2.10). Shortly before, Ben himself had committed symbolic patricide by killing Management, the mastermind behind the carnival. These violent deaths, along with Ben's sexual awakening – discussed below –, endorse the protagonist with the right to become the new leader of the community, and with the confidence to face his destiny.

Between Ben and his fate stands Brother Justin Crowe, Methodist minister of Russian descent. Justin is partially modelled on Father Charles Edward Coughlin, a Catholic priest who became a 1930s national celebrity thanks to his radio show, in which he broadcasted anti-Semitic and anti-communist messages (PBS, 2009). The contradiction between the benevolence which we tend to grant to a man of God and Justin's hidden goals is reflected by his own name: Justin evokes just, fair, and has also been the name of several saints, while Crowe brings to mind the ominous black bird that has so little in common a 'noble' bird like the hawk. And indeed that is, in a nutshell, the transformation of the character, at least from the point of view of those around him and the audience: from friend of the dispossessed and the people in need to an unequivocally evildoer: a lusty man who craves for his sister, Iris (2.1, 2.7, 2.10); a rapist who victimizes the women around him (2.10)<sup>8</sup>; an egomaniacal fanatic who pictures himself as bigger than Jesus Christ (2.3, 2.7); a mocker of the Bible who acts as a mobster (2.9, 2.11). However, Justin also represents a paradigmatic man of faith. The scriptwriters make it a point to connect him not only with the prophets who anticipated the Manifest Destiny of the United States, but also with a political leader who similarly fashioned himself as a man of faith, G. W. Bush. It is worth remembering that through the course of *Carnivàle's* running years, the consequences of G. W. Bush's renewed version of American exceptionalism – namely, the 2003 invasion of Iraq – conditioned the political agenda in the country. The enlightened model of religious manhood represented by John Winthrop is replicated by Justin, who

envisions the building of a city upon a hill ("a shining temple, a kingdom that will last for thousands and thousands of years", 1.12) as the basis for a theocratic state (2.11). But his New Canaan aspires to be a hell on earth rather than a model of Christian charity.

It is easy to understand why his populist speeches strike a chord with the abused Okies of the Depression era: Justin denounces that America has been stolen by international bankers, crooked politicians, and cheap immigrant labor (2.1). He censures the perversion of the ideals of the Founding Fathers and offers hope to the underclass (2.4). Likewise, he and the politicians allied with him self-fashion as the last true patriots, glorifying 'Americanism' as the only true -ism, and the migrant workers who follow them as the carriers of the national spirit (2.9). Not only does his message convey the ascendancy of Fascist rhetoric and ideas, but also his delivery (2.7, 2.9). In the words of Dias Branco, "he vocalizes his resoluteness and mastery over his followers and his destiny comes across through his straight, vertical posture, and the compact and imposing clerical black cassock that he wears" (2015: 64). Justin's powerful sermons invite us to read them in gender terms. As Connell explains, "fascism was a naked reassertion of male supremacy in societies that had been moving towards equality for women. To accomplish this, fascism promoted new images of hegemonic masculinity, glorifying irrationality (the 'triumph of the will', thinking with 'the blood') and the unrestrained violence of the frontline soldier" (2002: 250). The series' attention to detail also rewards the alert viewer with contextualizing bits and pieces of history, from the documentary footage of Mussolini in the opening credits to newspaper headlines chronicling the triumph of Nazism in Germany (2.8). Therefore, Justin's imposing ways convey the Law of the Father, the strong *pater familias* his children -in this case, his followers- aspire to emulate<sup>9</sup>. The image of Justin as a perverted father is reinforced by the late revelation that Sofie is the child of his rape of Apollonia. Father and daughter will reunite in the final episodes of season two, when sexual and filial tensions arise until the true nature of their relationship comes to light. The sexual anxiety implicit in Sofie and Justin's storyline stands as another inconclusive attack to a traditional system of sexual value in a show which winds up promising more sexual transgression than it delivers.

#### 4. QUEER IDENTITIES AND SEXUAL POLITICS

For the past two decades there has been an attempt to marry queer theory and disability studies through their shared goal of challenging social normativity, with momentous publications such as Eli Clare's *Exile and Pride* (1999), the issue of *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* entitled *Desiring Disability: Queer Theory Meets Disability Studies* (McRuer and Wilkerson, 2003), or more recently, Luczaks' queer disability anthology, *QDA* (2015). Many of these interdisciplinary authors and scholars use the term 'crip' as a parallel to 'queer' in order to denounce the primacy of sexual and corporeal norms. This section aims to prove that *Carnivàle*'s characters defy the conventional wisdom that renders the disabled as genderless and, consequently, sexless, because of their inability "to perform certain gendered behaviors in 'passable' ways" (Sandhal, 2003: 52, 45).

*Carnivàle* does not shy away from a representation of sexuality and sex as important elements in the identities of and interactions between the carnival's unconventional characters, nor does it portray old age and disability as barriers for sexual desire. For instance, Ruthie, the snake charmer, unapologetically pursues an intimate relationship with Ben, who looks like he might be at least half her age; her wrinkled though refined visage and slim body are captured by the camera as tempting objects, emulating the fascinated gaze of those who attend her snake-dancing performance (2.3). Challenging the idea that, "in popular culture, little people and people with disabilities in general are most often desexualized and displaced from narratives of romance" (Meeuf, 2014: 216), Samson is seen as much of a sexualized and sexual active character as any other. Thus, the audience does not flinch at seeing him requiring the services of a prostitute he knows during the dust storm that brings carnival activity to a halt (1.4); or at seeing his ex-wife pointing out that "not everything in [him] is small" (2.7).

Jonesy's scarred knee, clearly a source of shame for him as Rita Sue, one of his lovers, undresses him, is soon perceived as a sexualized object when she lusciously kisses it (1.8). Similarly, the Scorpion Lady's cleft hands do not make her caresses any less sensual as she tries to seduce Samson (2.7), and the facial hair of Lila, the Bearded Lady, is in fact what arouses Lodz, her lover (1.8). Other non-

normative bodies presented as powerful sources of desire belong to the fat-ridden crotch dancers, Rita Sue and her daughter Dora Mae, whose murder as a punishing action "for her transgression of patriarchal expectations of femininity" is compellingly discussed by Amato Ruggiero (2005: 88). In general, the marks of difference in these variant bodies are foregrounded rather than toned down, which makes Moe Folk declare that "the mise-en-scène suggests that standard bodies enjoy more stable relationships and more discrete couplings" (2007: n.pag.). However, I argue for a positive appraisal of such a rare, unashamed approach to and audiovisual representation of non-normative bodies.

The naturalness with which these characters' sexuality is apprehended accentuates Ben's conspicuous asexuality for most of the show, probably a consequence of his initial cluelessness. He repeatedly rejects the semi-serious 'approaches' by sexually liberated women such as Rita Sue and Dora Mae, although eventually consummates his ambivalent sexual/filial attraction to Ruthie as season one is coming to a close. Nevertheless, it is halfway through season two that we finally see him in a rather explicit sex scene with Sofie (2.6). Not only does this act seem to be part of his awakening to his powers and his mission (not surprisingly the setting, as the title of the episode, is "The Road to Damascus"); it also coincides with his acquiring new skills (such as the ability to know where to head in his search for Henry Scudder and Brother Justin), finding his father, and killing Management. That sexual encounter had already been prophesized in one of Ben's dreams, and is punctuated by the torrential rain that ensues, foreseeing a new beginning for the character.

It is also worth noting how Ben's approach takes the form of the traditional heterosexual courtship seen in teen flicks: when they are in the car, far from the crowd, he tries to kiss her to little effect because Sofie sees the specter of her dead mother; but he does not desist and convinces Sofie to dance with him to the carnival's distant music; after that, they return to the car and make love, sealing the show's conservative adherence to the patriarchy. This courtship coincides in time and contrasts with Brother Justin's ritualistic exploitation of several housemaids (2.3). His depiction as a hypersexualized father (in the double meaning of the term) contributes to the decidedly negative portrayal of the character. As Bruzzi explains, sexual father usually equals bad

or pervert in Western audiovisual culture, particularly in Hollywood, where being a moral guide is more important than being sexual (2005: xvii). Justin's lust towards his own daughter cannot but confirm this idea.

Everything considered, the show's sexual politics seems to be much more progressive in season one, which is also much more oblique in representational and narrative terms. Over that first season, Sofie and Libby develop a bold intimacy until they become lovers, much to the distress of Jonesy, to whom it takes several episodes to get over his fascination with Sofie. Nowhere is the vexed male gaze more evident than when an incredulous Jonesy watches Sofie and Libby dance in a bar in Babylon (1.5). In such a moment the narrative restrains the attempts of compulsory heterosexuality to disturb the connection between these two young women, playing with what TV reviewer Todd VanDerWerff labels as *Carnivàle's* mood of "barely repressed sexual panic" (2012: n.pag.).

For several episodes, Sofie successfully navigates between gender barriers. The ambiguity of her gender performance is highlighted by the few episodes which have her joining the hypermasculine menial labor of the male roustabouts, who refuse to see her as one of them (2.3). This activity, which requires an exploitation of the female anatomy that has little to do with strip or snake dancing, contributes to Sofie's 'butch' performance, along with her clothing style and homosexual desire. Conversely, the woman she is increasingly attracted to and whom she manages to seduce, Libby, with her 1930s Hollywood star look, plays the role of the 'femme'. Sofie can then be read as a destabilizing embodiment of the female masculinity theorized by Halberstam (1998). However, for most of season two – in which Sofie's importance in the larger mythological plot grows as, paradoxically, her screen time diminishes – she is presented as unequivocally heterosexual. This season is likewise more interested in tying everything together, to the point that those early self-contained episodes that took their time to dwell on character construction and the idiosyncrasies of carnival life, such as "Black Blizzard" (1.4) and "Babylon" (1.5), are altogether dispensed with to make the plot that leads to the confrontation of Ben and Justin advance.

Sadly, the increasing narrative and representational conventionality is



mirrored by a retreat to conservative gender and sexual performances. Although Sofie strays further away from Jonesy as the season progresses, her ambiguous relationship with Ben is finally consummated (2.6). From that moment on, the patriarchal logic is largely restored. Libby, up to that point an independent character who laid her own rules, ends up hurriedly marrying the classically masculine (though limping) Jonesy and capitulating to his male authority. Libby's story best exemplifies how the initially subverted hierarchies of sexuality are finally restored: monogamous and marital heterosexual relations rule over the social world of the carnival, and perversion and prostitution are proscribed as Libby promises to be faithful to Jonesy and to abandon the business of his father. To cap it all, in the carnival's final stop at Justin's New Canaan, Samson himself does not allow the Dreifuss family to perform their profitable cootch-dance act. Meanwhile, Sofie is first drawn towards Ben, and then towards the man she still does not know is her father, Justin. She becomes a tool for the writers to illustrate how these able-bodied protagonists are unequivocally driven by heterosexual desire and deserve a place within the patriarchal order as lover and father, respectively.

Daniel Knauf and the scriptwriters might have understood that the parade of unusual masculinities embodied by unconventional characters to whom sex is hardly a taboo, while contributing to the feeling of estrangement that has granted the show a cult following, prompted the alienation of television executives and mass audiences alike, resulting in its untimely cancellation. Despite *Carnivàle's* mainly positive portrayal of non-normative bodies, the series' transgressive nature – noticeable in its proposed sexual politics, disavowal of formulaic storytelling, and disregard towards viewers' expectations – is progressively attenuated by a retreat to a safer, conservative narrative. Around the figure of Sofie, to whom Ben and Justin are connected in unexpected carnal and spiritual ways, the show reaffirms its allegiance to a melodramatic plot that brings it closer to more conventional television. In the end, the unfortunate transition towards normative gender and sexual politics and able-bodied superiority compromise *Carnivàle's* potential to destabilize patriarchal expectations.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The author acknowledges support for the writing of this article from the Washington Irving scholarship granted by the Franklin Institute.

<sup>2</sup> I borrow the distinction from Wendy Jane Gagen, who explains that 'impairment' refers to an injury while 'disability' expresses the social construction surrounding the impairment (2007: 538).

<sup>3</sup> I.e., 2.6. Subsequent references to specific episodes will follow this model.

<sup>4</sup> The way the symbolic father of the nation, G. W. Bush, tackled the issue of 9/11 and its aftermath also seems to lurk behind this storyline of disputed figures of authority.

<sup>5</sup> That is at least what the audience may assume, but actor Michael J. Anderson's height (1,09m) and his difficulties to walk are in fact a consequence of him suffering from Osteogenesis imperfecta (TCM: n.date).

<sup>6</sup> Ironically, Jonesy will be shot dead three episodes after the healing. One could think the writers were here exerting some kind of poetic justice in the name of the disabled.

<sup>7</sup> Aloï and Johnston note how the plot's confrontation, in Manichean terms, between 'Creatures of Light' and 'Creatures of Darkness', resonate with G. W. Bush's 'Axis of Evil' rhetoric (2015: 12).

<sup>8</sup> Justin turns out to be the man who raped Apollonia and, therefore, Sofie's father. Although the similarities between *Carnivàle* and *Twin Peaks* – at least, in surreal mood and disregard towards traditional storytelling and character construction – have been mentioned in passing by TV reviewers (Santo, 2008: 39) and occasionally explored in certain detail by scholars (Hernández-Riwe Cruz and Acosta Sandoval, 2015), it would be interesting to analyze the gender and sexual anxieties behind the portrayal of *Carnivàle's* Justin and *Twin Peaks'* Bob as archvillains and rapist fathers.

<sup>9</sup> Bruzzi (2005) reviews how the idea of the child's refusal to identify with a weak father, popularized by Freud's "Moses and Monotheism" and then developed by Horkheimer to account for the fascination with the "super-father [...] furnished by fascist imagery", plays out over decades of US film (32).

## WORKS CITED

- AGUILÓ, I. (2013). "Sabios, *super-crips* y escucha profunda: Representaciones de la discapacidad como otredad en la banda experimental argentina Reynolds." *Lucero* 23: 25-36.
- ALOI, P. (2015). "The World, the Flesh and the Devil: Historical and Cultural Context in the Opening Credit Sequence." In *Carnivàle and the American Grotesque: Critical Essays on the HBO Series*, ALOI, P., and H. E. JOHNSTON (eds.). Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 29-40.
- ALOI, P., and H. E. JOHNSTON. (2015). "Introduction." In *Carnivàle and the American Grotesque: Critical Essays on the HBO Series*, ALOI, P., and H. E. JOHNSTON (eds.). Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 7-16.
- AMATO RUGGIERO, A. (2005). "Sexuality, Size and Sin in HBO's *Carnivàle*." *Feminist Media Studies* 5 (1): 87-90.
- BERGER, M., B. WALLIS and S. WATSON (eds.). (1995). *Constructing Masculinity*. New York and London: Routledge.
- BOGDAN, R. (1990). *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- BRUZZI, S. (2005). *Bringing Up Daddy: Fatherhood and Masculinity in Post-War Hollywood*. London: BFI.
- BURKHEAD, C. (2015). "An American Freak Show, an American Grotesque." In *Carnivàle and the American Grotesque: Critical Essays on the HBO Series*, ALOI, P., and H. E. JOHNSTON (eds.). Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 142-51.
- BUTLER, J. (2004a). *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London and New York: Verso.
- BUTLER, J. (2004b). *Undoing Gender*. London: Routledge.
- Carnivàle: The Complete First Season*. (2004). HBO Home Video. DVD.
- Carnivàle: The Complete Second Season*. (2006). HBO Home Video. DVD.
- CLARE, E. (1999). *Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness, and Liberation*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- CONNELL, R. (2002). "The History of Masculinity." In *The Masculinity Studies Reader*, ADAMS, R., and D. SAVRAN (eds.). Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 245-61.
- DIAS BRANCO, S. (2015). "Magic and Loss: Style, Progression and the 'Ending' of *Carnivàle*." In *Carnivàle and the American Grotesque: Critical Essays on the HBO Series*, ALOI, P., and H. E. JOHNSTON (eds.). Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 57-72.
- FALUDI, S. (2007). *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America*. New York: Henry Holt and Company.
- FOLK, M. (2007). "Sights and Slants: Visual Representation in *Carnivàle*." *Mediascape: UCLA's Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* [http://www.tft.ucla.edu/mediascape/Spring07\\_SlightsAndSlants.html](http://www.tft.ucla.edu/mediascape/Spring07_SlightsAndSlants.html) (Last accessed: 29 November 2016).
- GAGEN, W. J. (2007). "Remastering the Body, Renegotiating Gender: Physical Disability and Masculinity during the First World War, the Case of J. B. Middlebrook." *European Review of History* 14 (4): 525-41.
- HALBERSTAM, J. (1998). *Female Masculinity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- HERNÁNDEZ-RIWES CRUZ, J., and E. ACOSTA SANDOVAL. (2015). "The Equilibrium between Order, Chaos, the Dreaming and the Romantic Soul." In *Carnivàle and the American Grotesque: Critical Essays on the HBO Series*, ALOI, P., and H. E. JOHNSTON (eds.). Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 152-167.
- LINTON, S. (1998). *Claiming Disability*. New York and London: New York University Press.
- LUCZAK, R. (ed.). (2015). *QDA: A Queer Disability Anthology*. USA: Squares and Rebels.
- MCRUER, R., and A. L. WILKERSON (eds.). (2003). *Desiring Disability: Queer Theory Meets Disability Studies*. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 9 (1-2). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- MEEUF, R. (2014). "The Nonnormative Celebrity Body and the Meritocracy of the Star System: Constructing Peter Dinklage in Entertainment Journalism." *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 38 (3): 204-22.
- MINICH, J. A. (2010). "Disabling La Frontera: Disability, Border Subjectivity, and Masculinity in 'Big Jesse, Little Jesse' by Oscar Casares." *MELUS* 35 (1): 35-52.
- PBS. (2009).
- SANDHAL, C. (2003). "Queering the Crip or Crippling the Queer?: Intersections of Queer and Crip Identities in Solo Autobiographical Performance." In *Desiring Disability: Queer Theory Meets Disability Studies*. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 9 (1-2), MCRUER, R., and A. L. WILKERSON (eds.). Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 25-56.
- SANTO, A. (2008). "Para-Television and Discourses of Distinction: The Culture of Production at HBO." In *It's Not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-Television*

*Era*, LEVERETTE, M., B. L. OTT and C. L. BUCKLEY (eds.). New York and London: Routledge, 19-45.

SEGAL, L. (2008). "After Judith Butler: Identities, Who Needs Them?" *Subjectivity* 25: 381-394.

TCM. (n.date). "Michael J. Anderson." <http://www.tcm.com/tcmdb/person/3885%7C173553/Michael-J-Anderson> (Last accessed: 11 March 2017).

VANDERWERFF, T. (2012). "Carnivàle: 'Day of the Dead.'" *A. V. Club*, 28 March 2012. <http://www.avclub.com/tvclub/carnivale-day-of-the-dead-71162> (Last accessed: 28 November 2016).

WEINER, R. G. (2015). "I don't Appreciate Getting Shanghaied by a Pack of Freaks: Teratological Humanity in *Carnivàle*." In *Carnivàle and the American Grotesque: Critical Essays on the HBO Series*, ALOI, P., and H. E. JOHNSTON (eds.). Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 128-41.

Contact:

<ruben.peinado-abarrio@manchester.ac.uk>

Title:

De monstruos y hombres: Masculinidades en *Carnivàle* (HBO)