"Hey, What's the Matter with Your Friend?": Disability and Productive Staring in *The X-Files*

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Originally running for nine seasons from 1993 to 2002, *The X-Files* has notched over two hundred episodes, two movies, and two reboot seasons. The show gained a devoted following for exploring themes and challenging systems of power that had not been explored or challenged on television. Among the most frequently cited critical angles was its upending of traditional gender roles in the procedural drama, while also generating a zeitgeist-defining mistrust of governmental secrecy and technological progress while promoting cultural paranoia. In addition to the ways *X-Files* has been mined for its sociocultural legacy, it is also a valuable case study in how popular culture reinforces and challenges ingrained values of ability and disability. While the study of disability on television typically – and rightfully – focuses on the casting choices of abled and disabled actors and the authenticity of the disability experience, disability studies in science fiction has been more willing to broach theoretical avenues that have hitherto been met with aversion by the disability studies community.

Specifically, the historically dominant use of disability as a metaphorical prop or plot device – what David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder call "narrative prosthesis" – has been correctly regarded as a damaging trope to the rights and representation of disability in film and literature. Science fiction scholars argue, however, that narrative prosthesis can sometimes be interpreted as a potentially redeemable method of exploring the metaphorical role of disability in challenging normality and issues of biopower in ways that are more nuanced and productive than previously thought. The series uses its overarching alien colonization plot – what are called its "mythology" episodes – to engage issues of technological and scientific issues related to eugenics and the shifting perception of what is biologically normal and valuable. In addition, individual, self-contained episodes – "monster-of-the-week" episodes – contain a diverse and nuanced collection of the

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different ways that a science fiction television series can comment upon and disrupt prevailing perceptions of disability in popular culture.

In Katie Ellis's *Disability and Popular Culture*, she invokes a distinction made by John Fiske, who was himself drawing on Roland Barthes, between the "readerly" and the "writerly" text. While "readerly" texts are usually popular in content and audience and invite passive consumption with a relatively fixed process of interpretation, the "writerly" text "challenges the reader to constantly rewrite it, to make sense of it" (10). While Barthes reserved the "writerly" distinction for those producing avant-garde work, Fiske adds a third category: the "producerly" text. These are popular "writerly" texts that may accommodate usual meanings but can also expose and question those meanings in a popular context. In Fiske's words, the "producerly" text "offers itself up to popular production; it exposes, however reluctantly, the vulnerabilities, limitations, and weaknesses of its preferred meaning." "Producerly" texts are ones that set out to reproduce typical meanings but contain "voices that contradict the ones it prefers" (10). The "producerly" text is beyond its own control. As it relates to disability in popular culture, such texts are disabling and enabling; they reinforce and disrupt. Science fiction is an area well suited for the producerly text. Indeed, Ellis concludes that "while this book has not been about science fiction specifically, I kept finding myself returning to the genre for the important debates it introduces around disability, minorities, inclusion, technology and the economy" (165). *The X-Files* is an example of a science fiction "producerly" text that confronts the usual meanings of disability in popular culture even as it explicitly endorses them. The show is an important intersection of disparate topics, where popular television meets the theoretical innovation of science fiction disability studies.

"Strange Discourse:" *X-Files* Scholarship

Since *The X-Files* began garnering significant Nielson ratings, scholars have noticed the strange paradox of the series: It bridges the usual disconnect that between a widely popular show and a show with a dedicated and zealous cult following. Coming to prominence at the beginning of the internet age, *X-Files* was one of the first cultural artifacts to receive sustained attention on the internet. Perhaps fueled by the show's ambiguous and unorganized "mythology" arc, fans flocked to computers to take part in what Joe Bellon called "the strange discourse

of *The X-Files*."[1] The show was at the forefront of the creation of online communities of like-minded individuals, and scholarship has tended to focus on the powerful discourse the series has generated. Adrienne McLean's explains the "revolutionary transformations caused by new media," and the X-Philes'[2] "need for real connection" (9). Such scholarship has proven prescient (or at least lasting), as the recent reboots were spearheaded by a series of grassroots cyber campaigns.[3]

Besides fan culture and technology, *X-Files* scholarship has done well to dissect the series' impact and channeling of the '90s zeitgeist. Such scholarship focuses on the "nearness" of the series, or how science fiction is brought to a realistic, terrestrial level. As Theresa Geller notes, the show refused "to set its alien conspiracy in the future, in outer space, but rather ground it in the reality of U.S. history" (64). The grounded nature of the series allows for what Frederic Jameson calls a "defamiliarization" of "our experience of our own *present*" (151, emphasis added). Scholars have explicated the series' urgent commentary on its historical moment by discussing settler colonialism and ethnocidal imperialism as it is depicted through abduction (Geller). Others situate the series within emerging discourses of '90s culture, including UFO culture and its dissemination (Delasara). Overt references to "Deep Throat" and the Watergate scandal, finally, provide viewers ample sociocultural references from which to situate the series' ideology.

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[1] Matt Allair gives a comprehensive study of the history of *The X-Files* in "*The X-Files*: A History of the Fandom." He comments on the impact the series had on internet discourse, "if *Star Wars* had made it fashionable to like science fiction, which many argue it did, then *The X-Files* allowed subjects like the paranormal and UFOs to be openly talked about on the web, when prior to that such subjects were spoken of in hushed tones."

[2] "X-Philes" are a tight-knit, discursive, mostly online community. Christine Wooley reads the online fan community of X-Philedom as reflecting the ideology of the series—"its investment in intersubjectivity as contextualized by both the show's conspiratorial tone and unclosed narratives; The productivity of online *X-Files* fandom, including the very terminology through which X-Philes describe themselves, further suggests how we can refine our understanding of the styles of engagement with popular culture that the relationship 'between me and the show' represents" (30).

[3] On Chris Hardwick's podcast, *Nerdist*, Gillian Anderson expressed interest in resurrecting the series and cited Duchovny's supposed willingness as well, prompting a spirited and unprecedented Twitter campaign that eventually reached the desks of Fox executives—the normal shakers with the power to realize a reboot. But it was the Internet and community of fans, the latent "X-Philes," that perpetrated the movement and all but guaranteed the studio a healthy viewership. *X-Files* was one of the very first fanbases to use the internet to rally support for a series. Since its ending, different websites, fundraising sites, and other ventures have tried at revitalizing the series (Alair).

X-Files uses its generic trappings to comment on past and present concerns, and in the process, helps define and reinforce the zeitgeist.

In addition to the show's focus on fandom and its sustained discourse, Bellon highlights its "subversive, liberating" qualities that do "more than teach us to distrust authority; it teaches us to trust ourselves" (152). Gender readings of disability and postcolonial readings of the series necessarily incorporate issues of biopower (gender analysis will receive deeper treatment later on), but few scholars seriously unpack the physical representation of bodies in the series – how those bodies are depicted, reacted to, and manipulated. One who does is Linda Badley, who discusses the role of the body in the show:

> The truth may be "out there," as *The X-Files*' mantra asserts, but the alien (the other, the unknown) is found in or in relation to the body, albeit the body in multifarious and fantastic manifestations: decomposed, regenerated, transgendered, mutated, hybridized, implanted, cloned, or doubled, invaded, possessed, colonized, vanished, vaporized, exsanguinated, cannibalized, dissolved and ingested, zombified, harvested, commodified. (148)

Badley gestures to the myriad ways the human and alien body is manipulated in the series. Crucially, she grounds readings of power in the corporeal subject. Encompassed in the list, but not explicitly named, is disability. Just as *The X-Files* uses science fiction to address issues of colonialism, and just as the body is a powerful site of meaning-making, the show offers complex, though problematic, representations of disability in various forms.

While *X-Files* scholarship has not addressed the series' use of disability, there have been noticeably negative reactions from popular sources. One blogger was "deeply disappointed" in how *X-Files* portrayed the titular character's mental disability in the first season episode "Roland."[4] Another article, discussing the attitudinal barriers for people with disabilities, begins by maligning a conversation from the episode "Quagmire,"[5] wherein Mulder, discussing Captain Ahab's

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[4] "Roland" tells the story of Mulder and Scully's involvement in a case involving an intellectually disabled janitor, Roland, who becomes a suspect in a series of murders involving the scientists who are working on a new jet engine prototype. As it turns out, Roland is the twin brother of one of the project's former scientists, who was periodically taking control of Roland's body to take revenge on the former colleagues that ostracized him from the project.

[5] "Quagmire" follows Mulder and Scully's investigation into the existence of "Big Blue," a Loch-Ness-type monster supposedly responsible for a string of disappearances around its Georgia lake.

prosthetic leg, makes a flippant comment about the experience of disability, implying that because society holds people with disabilities to separate standards, it would be far easier to prove oneself in the world. The author interprets this exchange to mean that "Mulder would be considered lazy or a failure if he didn't work, whereas with a disability, he would have an excuse for slacking and would be called 'courageous' for merely holding a job, let alone succeeding." A final, troubling legacy of *X-Files*, disability, and popular culture is the memorialization of the episode "Home,"[6] which portrays mental and physical disability in an incestuous and murderous backwoods family. This representation endorses historically problematic ideas of disability as representing character flaws and inherent evil, as well as the dangerous belief that disability is an entirely genetic problem, one that should be eradicated for the safety of society. While such concerns are well founded, they let the more subversive, "producerly" instances of disability representation go unnoticed.

Disability in Television and Science Fiction

Popular criticism of *The X-Files* is microcosmic of the usual approaches disability scholars take with regards to popular television; they are primarily concerned with casting decisions and accuracy of representation. The majority of popular sources agree that representations of disability have made great strides in recent years. According to *Disability Scoop*, "the number of characters with disabilities on prime-time television this year [2019] is set to hit a record high. There will be 18 regularly-appearing characters with disabilities on prime-time network shows during the 2018-2019 season, accounting for 2.1 percent of portrayals." In addition to statistical data, shows like *Speechless* and *Switched at Birth* have helped shift portrayals of disabled characters that have historically been depicted as pity-evoking "Tiny Tims" and vengeful "Captain Ahabs." Despite progress, disability prognosticators are quick to add that there is a long way to go, citing shows like *13 Reasons Why* and *Atypical* as shows that promote dangerous stereotypes of mental illness or cast able-bodied actors in disabled characters' roles.

The agents' *Moby-Dick* conversation is thematically relevant, given their search for a mythical water monster.

[6] Any internet search for the best *X-Files* episode will turn up "Home."

Scholarship on disability in television deals with similar topics, though it focuses more on how popular entertainment is used in the social construction of ability and disability. Most scholars agree with Paul Darke that popular culture "defines parameters of normality" and that TV shows in particular have a profound influence on how disability is viewed. From there, interpretations vary wildly, from those that are critical of prodisability themes (Weinberger and Greenbaum) to those interested in the well-being of people with disabilities (Zhang and Haller), who laud all attempts at bringing disability into public discourse. In the end, there is a consensus on the basic premise that while popular culture can reinscribe stigmatization and stereotypes, it also has the potential to produce cultural artifacts that disrupt stereotypes, from *Gray's Anatomy* (Wilder) to *The Simpsons* (Fink).

Despite fruitful analysis, disability studies treatment popular television tends to not deviate from what it rightly sees as the most urgent, activist-oriented issues of disability in popular culture. In science fiction, however, disability scholars are making important moves related to the abstract, metaphorical potential of disability. Historically, disability as metaphor has been almost always destructive for the disabled character. Mitchell and Snyder call the literary tropes associated with disability metaphor "narrative prosthesis," referring to the "perpetual discursive dependency on disability" that manifests in literature "as a stock feature of characterization and, second, as an opportunistic metaphorical device" (222). Disability primarily serves to enhance the characterization of the able-bodied. Physical or mental disability metaphorically mirrors thematic or personality abnormality and degeneration. The presence of disability signals that something is amiss and needs to be fixed. Lennard Davis argues that "the preponderance of disability metaphors stems from an ableist culture that has conditioned people to be distracted by disability in a narrative not explicitly about disability" (Schalk 140). Thus, the metaphor ends up signifying something unrelated to the actual disability, and by so doing, reinforces the objectification and marginalization of disabled characters. And yet, to dismiss all disability metaphors as harmful dismisses the potential of metaphors that do take on meanings relevant to the culture and experience of disability. More recently, scholars working with race and postcolonialism have excavated disability metaphors that contain both concrete – applicable to the rights and activism of the disabled – and metaphorical meanings (Quayson). This challenge to prevailing attitudes towards disability metaphor has also been influential in the study of disability in science fiction (Boyd).

When combined with disability in television, the analytical potential of science fiction disability takes on even greater significance. If popular television is instrumental in establishing the boundaries and definitions of normality, and "producerly" texts work to undermine established assumptions from within the popular culture apparatus, then a science fiction "producerly" text can disrupt – even if it upholds – ableist assumptions in ways that other genres and previous interpretations of disability in popular culture cannot.

"Mythology" Episodes and New Eugenics

Disability scholar Lennard Davis was instrumental in unpacking the constructed concept of normality. Describing the "imperative of the norm," Davis explains that the modern concept of the normal, and thus the modern concept of the abnormal, took form with the advent of modern statistics. For the first time, scholars could accurately measure what is average, or normal, and thus determine what falls outside of the acceptable standard deviation – what is not normal. Armed with "scientific" proof of biological variability, statisticians would go on to influence a generation of eugenicists who would use statistics as a justification for continued inequality along lines of race, gender, class, and ability. Indeed, the modern definition of disability came to be defined as a biological body that falls outside the acceptable range of statistical variability.[7] As such, the so-called scientific basis of prejudicial eugenic policies rested on the connection between marginalized groups and the belief that they are biological outliers. The pervasive beliefs of Francis Galton and his eugenicist disciples – including, in America, leaders like Theodore Roosevelt – rested on the fundamental assumption that unwanted populations were disabled. When landmark decisions such as *Buck vs Bell* upheld the legality of forced sterilization, they were made on the assumption that sterilization would eliminate outliers and prevent their spread. In effect, the eugenics movement institutionalized the belief that the state had a moral mandate to raise the average. In addition to harnessing ableist rhetoric, eugenics was presented as a cutting-edge, technologically innovative program. *The X-Files* utilizes the conceptual freedom of its genre to repackage this history for an updated cultural moment – new anxieties, new technologies, and new bodies.

[7] For more on this, see Foucault's *Madness and Civilization*.

The "mythology" episodes cover the series' over-arching investigation into governmental and extraterrestrial conspiracies to colonize Earth with aliens and alien-human hybrids. While the exact plot becomes increasingly muddy as the series continues, there are elements that remain steadfast. One of these is the widespread use of biopower[8] and the attempt on the part of the antagonists to, like eugenicists before them, raise the average of human ability. In a show that often expresses distrust for technological innovation, choosing instead to show the destructive capabilities such innovation can bring,[9] the philosophical motivation of the entire series' villains is that humans are fundamentally flawed and limited. Human biology is insufficient to confront the inevitable colonization of extraterrestrials. Through manmade and alien technology, clandestine parties conspire to change what is normal. As a result, old definitions of normality and abnormality are adjusted. If what is considered normal is raised several standard deviations, then what was once normal is just as abnormal as those usually considered aberrant. Likewise, if definitions of "able-bodiness" become even more stringent, then definitions of disability become increasingly malleable. The series depicts a new eugenics that forces once-able-bodies to confront an unattainable new normal.

An early example of this new eugenics occurs in the season 1 episode, "Eve." Mulder and Scully uncover a government sanctioned human cloning project designed to create genetically modified super soldiers. The project goes awry, and unanticipated results doom the project, but the impulse to alter human ability remains throughout the series. The Syndicate, a covert organization that is the show's main antagonist for most of its run, invests generations of resources in splicing human genetics with that of aliens. Despite their machinations, however, attempts to redefine human ability are usually thwarted, either by Mulder and Scully, alien intervention, or their own scientific hubris. As a result, the series is skeptical about the feasibility of such a project and reveals a deep-seated anxiety

[8] As introduced and theorized by Michel Foucault in *History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*. Indeed, Foucault's relevance in interpreting *The X-Files* gestures towards valuable future work on the series.

[9] Not all technology is presented in a negative light, it should be noted. The "Lone Gunmen," who eventually received their own short-lived spin-off series, use technology to aid Mulder and Scully in their pursuits. It should also be noted, however, that the Lone Gunmen often utilize technology to combat the destructive technology created by higher powers. Indeed, they are perhaps the most paranoid and mistrusting characters of the series. The Lone Gunmen, in this sense, demonstrate the responsible, ethical use of technology.

over traditional markers of ability, disability, and super-ability. As old standards of normality and abnormality change, so does the ability to recognize, and control, abnormal bodies. *X-Files* argues that the eugenic impulse still infects systems of power. Old eugenics established parameters of normality; new eugenics shows those parameters to be volatile and subject to change based on the political, technological moment.

This anxiety is frequently depicted through the conflation of super-ability and disability. In "Eve," for example, biological modification does produce super-abled clones. The subjects have increased physical and mental capabilities, far above what is traditionally considered normal or average. The sudden disparity between abled and super-abled, however, leads to a crisis of categorization. For the traditionally able-bodied, super-abled clones appear to be mentally *dis*abled, leading to their incarceration in a mental hospital. For super-abled clones, the traditionally abled are then perceived as disabled, leading to their extermination (murder) of those they deem unwanted. For both sides, the sudden disarranging of usual markers of ability results in a universal impulse to categorize the abnormal as disabled.

This trend is born out throughout the series. Time and again, characters with super-abilities are deemed disabled and subjected to the usual methods employed by the able-bodied to deal with the disabled: marginalization, extermination, and the most frequently used in the series, institutionalization. In "D.P.O.," for example, a socially marginalized but otherwise abled character experiences "acute hypokalemia," which allows him to make lightning strike at will. Unsure of how to prosecute him, the episode ends with him being confined to a mental hospital. In the second season episode, "Aubrey," a super-abled child is caught killing a series of FBI agents, the result of genetic memories which have been passed to her from her vengeful father. She too is placed in a psychiatric ward. The list of episodes where institutionalization is the common reaction to a confounding super-ability goes on. "Pusher," "Duane Berry," as well as the aforementioned "Eve," all feature the misreading – or purposeful misdiagnosis – of super-ability as disability as a means of controlling unruly and unusual bodies. In the world of the series, of course, many of the incarcerated *are* serial murderers, so their institutionalization reads as understandable and necessary; although it is interesting that a number of these serial murderers – the aforementioned "Aubrey" and "Roland," for example – are conduits for the murderous intentions of other characters. The disabled body is used as a vessel, a plot device for the purposes of the able-bodied. The larger

trend of presenting the disabled as violent killers shows the series' investment in traditional stereotypes of disability representation. These inaccurate misinterpretations – or deliberately harmful representations – destabilizes normal markers of ability and disability.

"Humbug" and Feminist Disability Theory

In addition to the overarching disability metaphor of the series, *The X-Files* also features self-contained episodes that offer unique angles on issues of disability and gender. Indeed, gender is an area frequently discussed in *X-Files* scholarship. Traditional male-female television duos feature a dominant, authoritative, and action-prone male with a more passive, emotionally empathetic female, such as *Law and Order: SVU*. *X-Files* uses this space to explore gender issues and subvert traditional gender authority. It is Scully that adheres to authority; she is chosen by the powers that be to spy on Mulder. Scully is the "eager, objective, scientific professional" (Bellon 149). She is not squeamish or passive. She frequently must rescue Mulder and play the part of the by-the-book authority figure. Conversely, Mulder is an intuitive, emotional, empathetic counterpart to Scully's logic and rationality. He gets emotionally invested in his cases, whereas Scully strives to remain detached. Mulder's entire career investigating the paranormal is a reaction to the disappearance of his sister, who he believes was abducted, despite the professional ridicule it brings him. Gender roles are resignified in *The X-Files*, but they are also upheld. Mulder shows a stereotypically masculine interest in pornography, sports, and a "reckless lack of concern for Bureau procedure" (150). Scully undermines her own scientific rationality by showing flashes of deep, religious faith. In what Wilcox and Williams call "gender liminality," Scully and Mulder "walk a heroic path along the border, each engaging the other in struggles with masculine and feminine, rational and nonrational, mind and body" (120). Specific to Scully, Lisa Parks argues that Scully "negotiates her relationship to the monstrous in a way that empowers her . . . she uses scientific and legal practices to interrogate and to expose the limits of their masculinized traditions" (122).

Gender scholars are not entirely in line with such a liberating vision of gender in the series. Beth Braun describes gender's major manifestation in the series as "a

fear of the 'bad mother,' or female sexuality in general" (93).[10] Primarily analyzing the film *Fight the Future*, Braun describes a fear of the womb that equates fertility with monstrosity. Mothers are conflated with aliens and supernatural fears are conflated with fear of sexuality, specifically female. These associations become fraught when considered alongside disability. One of the first to connect disability and gender, Aristotle described the female body as "mutilated," monstrous, or, in modern terms, disabled (Garland-Thomson).

"Humbug," is a powerful critique of an ableist, male-dominated society. The episode was groundbreaking in several ways: It is one of the first overtly comedic episodes in the series, one of the series' first use of self-reflexivity, and it introduced the writing of Darin Morgan, who, though he only wrote six episodes (two in the recent reboot seasons), is credited with penning *The X-Files*' funniest, most challenging, and most heralded episodes. Finally, and most importantly, Morgan's episodes are deeply interested in the mediation and awareness of *The X-Files* image, its tropes, and its own power structures.[11] This section engages aforementioned questions of gender and introduces disability as another way to interpret the series' self-reflexivity and challenge of both society's power structures as well as its own ideologies. To this end, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's theory of staring is applied to a brief exchange between Agent Scully and a man with a conjoined twin. The exchange literally exposes aberrant bodies, conflates female and disabled bodies, and establishes a productive stare that works to dismantle normative, hegemonic power as well as the series' own perception of gender and normalcy.

Morgan's episodes tend to focus much less on Mulder and Scully, instead choosing to develop one-off characters that are typically reserved as narrative plot points. One of the main sources of subversion in the episode is its comedy. Being the first overtly comedic episode, the series' creators were concerned about

[10] Braun critiques gender in *X-Files* by comparing it with *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, a similarly supernatural, gender bending television show that was airing simultaneously. Like *X-Files*, Braun believes that both shows "reflect many of the same concerns: a fascination with the mystery and danger of sexuality and the notion that, underneath our civilized demeanors, we all have the capacity for evil" (94). Furthermore, like *The X-Files*, *Buffy* has garnered a significant critical following and maintains a strong, active fanbase.

[11] On Kumail Nanjiani's podcast *The X-Files Files*, Darin Morgan explains how he approached the characters of Mulder and Scully, "the one thing I thought was bullshit was that Mulder and Scully were just too good looking to be presented as outsiders. Mulder would never have problems being accepted or being treated like I did" Kumail, whose podcast analyzes episodes and interviews cast and crew, and has a loyal fan base in its own right, was rewarded for his efforts by being cast in the upcoming mini-series.

jeopardizing the tone of the show. The comedy is integral to the episode's progressive themes. For example, when Jim Rose's character asks Scully, "can you imagine going through your whole life looking like that?," the camera cuts to Mulder in a super-hero pose, hair blowing and a leg propped up; comedy leads to criticism. Darin Morgan remains unhappy with the episode, citing an unexplainable "awkwardness" that makes it "unwatchable" to him (Nanjiani). But it is that awkwardness that makes the episode so potent and jarring, which is most acutely experienced in a particularly awkward scene. Morgan has been accused of hating *The X-Files* and hating Mulder (Nanjiani). But what he attempted to do was to "point out the absurdities about whatever the episode is about. I point out the absurdity of the series" (Nanjiani). Comedy is how Morgan accomplishes his goal. The episode was a commercial and critical success, and the once concerned executives were eager for more comedy. The final product is an episode that is critical of its own system and challenges the series to recognize its absurdity. The use of comedy and self-reflexivity became a hallmark of the series, with many similarly toned episodes following in its wake.[12]

In the episode, Scully and Mulder are investigating a mysterious death at a sideshow community. In a telling and well-crafted shot reverse sequence, Scully is awakened by a man with a conjoined twin, Lenny. Scully answers Lenny's knock wearing a robe. Lenny, who lives nearby, is also wearing a robe. When Scully answers the door, she first makes eye contact with Lenny before dropping her gaze to his stomach, where the loosely fitting robe has revealed his conjoined twin. Using medium shots up to now, Scully's brow tightens, her lips purse, and her staring takes on a startled appearance before cutting abruptly to the first close up of the conjoined twin. The camera then cuts to Lenny's face, where he too is not looking at Scully's face but at her partially exposed breast, also the result of her loosely donned robe. Paralleling the previous shot, the camera pans up to Scully's face, where she is still noticeably staring at Lenny's stomach. Realizing what she's doing, she quickly moves her eyes to Lenny's face, who is also awkwardly shifting his gaze from Scully's chest to her eyes. In an unspoken moment of mutual discomfort, both characters look down at their revealed bodies before rushing to cover themselves.

[12] In addition to Morgan's other episodes, some other examples of comedic episodes include: "Small Potatoes" (season 4, episode 20); "Bad Blood" (season 5, episode 12); "X-Cops" (season 7, episode 12); "Je Souhaite" (season 7, episode 12).

Lenny and Scully stare. For feminist disability scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, "staring registers the perception of difference and gives meaning to impairment by marking it as aberrant," and "creates an awkward partnership that estranges and discomforts both viewer and viewed" (56-57). Staring adds to the obsessed and intense conflict society has with the disabled body. It represents a person's active participation in the marginalization of a group, which, in this case, is disability. As a feminist disability scholar, Garland-Thomson is concerned with the similar relationship society has with the female and disabled body. The two are often conflated in the eyes of hegemonic power, and the individual struggles of the female and disabled bodies can be united to combat the oppression of two groups that "have always been stared at" (56). In the brief exchange between Lenny and Scully, "Humbug" establishes a productive stare that exposes the similar discomfort of being a woman and being disabled by subverting the established role that Scully plays and exploiting the equating of feminine and monstrosity by coupling her breast with a conjoined twin.

The episode calls into question the gender power structures of the series by combining the shared discomfort of disabled and female bodies. In this way, it exposes the absurdity of Mulder's position as the Outsider. In essence, the episode brings the real world back into the series. It comments on the fact that, if *X-Files* is "subversive" or "liberating," it is still unrealistic fiction. It recognizes that there is a real world beyond the shifted, bizarre world of the series, a world where Mulder is still a pinnacle of heteronormativity and Scully and Lenny are still, to different degrees, abnormal. The episode undercuts scholars who see gender liminality in the series as a positive, liberating challenge to gender dynamics, though Wilcox and Williams still cite this moment in their analysis. It suggests that while re-assigning gender may be a powerful tool in the show, it has not gone as far as it could. Mulder will never be the outsider; he will never realistically be the Other. Finally, to scholars that read a fear of the womb and dangerous sexuality into the series, "Humbug" is a jarring agreement. In this scene, Lenny's conjoined twin – who, in keeping with usual portrayals of disability, turns out to be the killer in the story – is equated with Scully's breast. Even though Gillian Anderson became a sex symbol in the 1990s, the series itself rarely sexualized Scully.[13] The sudden exposure of her

[13] Scully is rarely sexualized. In "Pilot," she is shown changing in front of Mulder, but the series quickly decided to adopt a desexualized image of Scully, using costuming and writing to cover and ignore her body. Mulder is more sexualized, though his too is an inactive one. His obsession with the Truth leaves him little time for physical intimacy. A noticeable exception is "War of the

breast and its immediate conflation with a murderous disability creates a shocking affirmation of fear of sexuality *and* disability. By highlighting the mutual (socially perceived) deviance of female sexuality and physical aberrance, the moment calls into question the established fears of the series. The moment is Darin Morgan's method of uncovering a possible fear that has lurked beneath the surface since the show's beginning, a fear of addressing sexuality and physical difference, a fear akin to Freud's thoughts on fetishism. *The X-Files* worked hard to minimize Scully's sexuality, and if there is a disabled, or physically different body in the series, it is usually a source or conduit of evil. By literally uncovering the two, Scully and Lenny represent the still-present, still unaddressed sexuality and disability of the series. Darin Morgan's writing exposes a gap in *The X-Files*, and he challenges the series to address its own power structures.

The scene also draws further attention to the gender power structures of the series as a whole. Mulder is the feeling, emotional outcast that is quick to accept absurd circumstances and is eager to explore new things. In "Humbug," Scully is the accepting one. She eats a bug to connect with the animalistic Conundrum, and accepts the humanity of the "freaks" in the town, temporarily departing from her rational, science-centric worldview. The carnival setting results in, for Scully, a carnivalesque upending of norms. Moreover, after their exchange, Scully and Lenny are bonded for the remainder of the episode. They empathize with each other. Scully feels great remorse for Lenny when it is revealed that his alcoholism and disability have caused multiple murders. She cares far more than Mulder, which undermines the Mulder-as-feeling/Scully-as-unfeeling dichotomy. Scully feels a connection of Otherness with Lenny, one that Mulder, Morgan subtextually argues, could not possibly understand. While great pains are taken to depict Mulder as "spooky," and outside the norm, he still does not possess those characteristics that mark a body as deviant. He is not disabled and he is not a woman. Scully and Lenny have both seen the other's unseeable identity, their fleshy truth. The exposing exchange binds the two and conflates their mutual aberrance. They establish a productive stare that creates respect in their shared difference. The moment re-*re*-signifies gender in the series.

Finally, the scene's cinematography, narrative context, and diegetic setting all add significant weight to the exchange. Scully answers the door from a high angle; she is looking down at Lenny – who peers up at Scully from a low angle – from the

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Coprophages," when Mulder has an intimate fling with a beautiful entomologist; the episode was written by Darin Morgan.

doorway of her trailer. When her eyes rest on Lenny's conjoined twin, Scully's gaze is made more conspicuous by the length her eyes must travel. They are noticeably lower than if she was looking at his face. Conversely, Lenny would have to raise his eyes to meet Scully's, but his look is noticeably straight forward. His alarm at her exposed breast is made more apparent by the verticality of the shot. Furthermore, the purpose of the scene gives weight to the meaning of the exchange. Ostensibly, the only narrative goal of the scene is to inform Scully that there has been another murder. This follows the typical formula of an *X-Files* episode, but it also grants the writer a variety of ways to stage it. Someone else in the trailer park could have informed Scully that someone else had been murdered. For instance, Lenny or someone else could have told Mulder. The fact that Morgan chose to write the exchange between Scully and Lenny signals a conscious decision to have an uncomfortable, divulging moment between the disabled and female body. Finally, the moment is accented by the community. In a haven for sideshow performers, abnormality is normal. But Lenny is not used to seeing a fully able-bodied woman, and Scully is not used to seeing a man with a conjoined twin. Thus, they both react genuinely to what is a realistic sense of shock at being exposed to an aberrant other. In this way, the setting and plot of the episode underscores the genuine discomfort of being exposed to something that is abnormal. In a place where the unseeable is seen every day, the mutual shock of Scully and Lenny gives greater weight to the conflation of disabled and female bodies and the self-reflexive meaning found therein.

Darin Morgan would go on to write "Clyde Bruckman's Final Repose" and "Jose Chung's From Outer Space," two of the most beloved episodes in the *X-Files* canon, and two of the most complicated meta-narratives ever aired on network television. But it was in "Humbug" that he developed his trademarked self-awareness. The episode is the only one to directly address the shared experience of disabled and female bodies, and one of the few episodes to explicitly sexualize Scully. In the process of challenging the series' perceived "subversive" qualities, Morgan subverts the show. He challenges the series to address its fear of sex, difference, and sexual difference; he points out the absurdity of Mulder and Scully as beautiful outsiders, and credit must be given to the series that would produce and air an episode critiquing itself. Contained within *X-Files* is a range of approaches popular television and science fiction television in particular can take with regards to representing disability. At times, the series produced episodes featuring disabled characters that were, as Fiske would call them, "readerly" texts, pieces of popular

entertainment that reinforce usual meanings. In the case of disability, this manifested as disabled characters being portrayed as mere tools to be used by the better abled or as a direct, violent campaign against the possibilities of a disability community. Analysis could end here, and *X-Files* becomes yet another destructive reinforcement of dangerous stereotypes. However, just as some “readerly” texts unwittingly become “producerly” texts, *X-Files* turns institutional skepticism back on itself by re-orienting traditional markers of ability and disability and self-reflexively questioning its own use of cultural power. *The X-Files* is true to their word. If its mission is to question everything, to never stop searching, part of that involves staring back at itself.

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