

## **Beyond True Crime: Intersectional Racism, Class Inequality, and Institutional Failure in *Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story***

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**Abstract.** This study examines how *Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story* (2022) represents structural racism, class inequality, and institutional failure through an intersectional and post-national framework. The research addresses the problem of how true crime media often centers the perpetrator while prior scholarship critiques ethical issues in true crime, this study fills a gap by analyzing structural racism and class via intersectionality in *Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story*. Employing qualitative content analysis informed by intersectionality and post-national approach, this study examines key scenes depicting institutional biases. Findings uncover patterns of racialized police inaction, spatial marginalization, and citizenship disparities, revealing intersecting oppressions in true crime representation. These intersecting oppressions form a broader structure of institutionalized disbelief and selective empathy, demonstrating that Dahmer's case cannot be understood as individual pathology alone. Rather, the series functions as a cultural text that exposes how systemic inequalities shape vulnerability, hinder justice, and challenge the myth of American exceptionalism.

**Keywords:** *intersectionality, post-nationalism, structural racism, true crime media, jeffrey dahmer, institutional failure, testimonial injustice*

**Abstrak.** Studi ini menganalisis bagaimana *Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story* (2022) menggambarkan rasisme struktural, ketidaksetaraan kelas, dan kegagalan institusional melalui kerangka kerja interseksional dan pasca-nasional. Penelitian ini menanggapi masalah bagaimana media kejahatan nyata seringkali memusatkan perhatian pada pelaku, sementara penelitian sebelumnya mengkritik masalah etika dalam media kejahatan nyata. Studi ini mengisi celah tersebut dengan menganalisis rasisme struktural dan ketidaksetaraan kelas melalui perspektif interseksional dalam *Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story*. Menggunakan analisis konten kualitatif yang didasarkan pada pendekatan interseksional dan pasca-nasional, penelitian ini menganalisis adegan-adegan kunci yang menggambarkan bias institusional. Temuan mengungkapkan pola ketidakberdayaan polisi yang rasial, marginalisasi spasial, dan ketidaksetaraan kewarganegaraan, mengungkap penindasan yang saling berpotongan dalam representasi kejahatan nyata. Penindasan yang saling berpotongan ini membentuk struktur yang lebih luas dari ketidakpercayaan institusional dan empati selektif, menunjukkan bahwa kasus Dahmer tidak dapat dipahami sebagai patologi individu semata. Sebaliknya, serial ini berfungsi sebagai teks budaya yang mengungkap bagaimana ketidaksetaraan sistemik membentuk kerentanan, menghambat keadilan, dan menantang mitos keistimewaan Amerika.

**Kata Kunci:** *interseksionalitas, pasca-nasionalisme, rasisme struktural, media kejahatan nyata, Jeffrey Dahmer, kegagalan institusional, ketidakadilan testimonial*

## INTRODUCTION

Despite the expanding body of scholarship on true crime media, critical debates remain unresolved regarding how these narratives engage with systemic inequality and institutional failure, particularly in relation to race, sexuality, class, and citizenship. Existing studies predominantly examine audience reception, ethical sensationalism, or the psychological construction of criminal perpetrators. While these approaches provide valuable insights, they often treat true crime as a representational or affective phenomenon rather than as a cultural text embedded within broader socio-structural conditions. Consequently, comparatively little attention has been paid to how true crime media participates in exposing, or, at times, normalizing, forms of structural violence sustained by state institutions.

This gap is especially evident in analyses of how law enforcement and judicial systems are represented in relation to marginalized communities. Victims from racialized, queer, immigrant, and working-class backgrounds are frequently rendered peripheral within both media narratives and institutional responses, resulting in uneven distributions of visibility, credibility, and protection. As cultural texts that claim to pursue justice and truth, true crime narratives warrant closer examination of how they frame institutional responsibility and social inequality, particularly within the context of American racial and class hierarchies.

Within this scholarly context, *Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story* (2022), a Netflix limited series created by Ryan Murphy and Ian Brennan, provides a significant case for analysis. Rather than focusing exclusively on the psychological pathology of Jeffrey Dahmer as an individual offender, the series situates his crimes within broader social and institutional environments that enabled their persistence over more than a decade. Through repeated depictions of police negligence, racial bias, homophobia, and class-based marginalization, the series foregrounds the role of institutional failure in shaping patterns of victimization, particularly among queer men of color and immigrant communities.

Although the series attracted widespread public attention and achieved high viewership upon its release (Porter, 2022), scholarly and public discussions have largely centered on ethical controversies surrounding victim representation and the potential exploitation of trauma (Shanfeld, 2022). While these concerns are important, they risk narrowing analytical focus to questions of morality and reception, leaving the socio-structural dimensions of the narrative insufficiently examined. This omission is notable given that the majority of individuals affected by Dahmer's crimes occupied marginalized social positions that directly shaped their vulnerability to violence and their exclusion from institutional protection.

Drawing on scholarship on structural racism and institutional inequality, scholars argue that racial and class hierarchies persist not only through overt discrimination but also through institutional norms that appear neutral while systematically reproducing unequal outcomes (Bonilla-Silva, 2018; Williams & Mohammed, 2013). Empirical research on policing further demonstrates persistent racial disparities in law enforcement practices, with Black and Hispanic individuals disproportionately dismissed, surveilled, or criminalized even when controlling for contextual variables (Lee, 2024). These findings provide a critical framework for examining how media representations of crime intersect with broader structures of power and inequality.

This study seeks to address existing gaps in true crime scholarship by examining *Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story* as a socio-cultural text that articulates race, class, and institutional responsibility within contemporary American society. Rather than

approaching the series primarily through ethical debates or psychological interpretations of the perpetrator, this research foregrounds its socio-structural representations, focusing on how patterns of victimization and institutional response are shaped by broader systems of inequality. Through this lens, the series is analyzed for the ways it represents the intersection of race and class in the construction of victims' vulnerability, as well as how institutional failure is narratively framed as a consequence of intersecting forms of oppression, including racism, class inequality, and social marginalization. By situating the series within these structural contexts, the study emphasizes that institutional neglect is not portrayed as incidental or individual error, but as a systemic condition embedded in social and institutional hierarchies. Using qualitative content analysis of selected episodes, this article contributes to cultural and media studies by offering an intersectional, post-national reading that demonstrates how true crime narratives can function as a critical lens for understanding structural inequality and systemic neglect in American society.

## METHODS

This study employs qualitative content analysis with an intersectional and critical cultural studies orientation, which is appropriate for examining how television narratives construct race, class, and institutional failure. (Creswell, 2008) Through qualitative, the researcher gains deeper insight into how individuals and communities perceive media representation and ethical concern. The primary source of data is *Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story*, with several purposively selected episodes chosen for their relevance to the research focus. The Post-National approach serves as the overarching analytical lens for this study. This framework challenges the cultural nationalism and American exceptionalism embedded in traditional American Studies. Its primary aim is to deconstruct dominant American myths and promote more critical, comparative, and transnational analyses (Adi, 2020). Within the context of the Dahmer case, this perspective interrogates popular narratives about identity, power hierarchies, racial relations, and institutional behavior in the United States.

Intersectionality, introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), forms the main theoretical foundation of this research. This framework posits that individuals experience marginalization through the simultaneous intersections of social identities such as race, gender, class, and sexual orientation. Applying intersectionality to media analysis enables this study to examine how Dahmer's victims, many of whom were young Black men and immigrants from marginalized backgrounds, are represented within the series. The framework also guides the investigation of how structural injustices such as racism, homophobia, and economic inequality contribute to victims' vulnerability, and how institutions like law enforcement frequently dismiss or overlook reports from minority communities (Sasha, 2019). Within this study, intersectionality is operationalized through coding scenes that reveal the interaction of multiple systems of oppression, for instance, how poor Black victims receive differential treatment from institutions compared to other demographic groups.

Data were collected through purposive sampling of four key episodes of *Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story* (Episodes 1, 2, 5, and 7), selected based on explicit inclusion criteria: the presence of interactions between marginalized individuals and institutional authorities, the visibility of race, class, sexuality, or citizenship shaping institutional responses, and narrative moments where institutional action or inaction directly affected victim protection. Episodes focusing primarily on the perpetrator's personal background

without substantive institutional engagement were excluded. Based on these criteria, eight scenes were analyzed: one from Episode 1, three from Episode 2, two from Episode 5, and two from Episode 7. The analysis employed qualitative content analysis conducted by the author as the sole coder, following a three-stage coding process: open coding to identify instances of institutional bias, neglect, and differential treatment; axial coding to categorize patterns such as testimonial injustice, racialized policing, spatial marginalization, and citizenship-based exclusion; and selective coding to synthesize these patterns in relation to the study's theoretical frameworks. Intersectionality was operationalized by examining how overlapping identities, race, gender, sexuality, class, and citizenship, shaped institutional credibility and protection, while the Post-National approach guided analysis of how national institutions unevenly distributed recognition and care, challenging assumptions of equal citizenship. Coding consistency was ensured through iterative recording and constant comparison across scenes, with repeated scene-viewing conducted at each coding stage to verify interpretive stability and grounding in visual and narrative evidence. Trustworthiness was further strengthened through theory triangulation by interpreting key scenes through both Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) and the Post-National approach (Adi, 2020), allowing institutional failure to be analyzed systematically rather than as isolated narrative moments.

## FINDINGS

### Racial Prejudice in Policing Practices



**Figure 1.** Netflix, *Monster: Jeffrey Dahmer*, episode 2 “Don’t Go” (42:14)

Across Episodes 1 and 2, the series repeatedly depicts law enforcement officers dismissing warnings issued by Black residents, particularly Black women, despite visible

signs of danger. In Episode 2 (“Don’t Go”), Glenda Cleveland explicitly states that the individual found with Dahmer “didn’t look like a man... he looked like a child” (42:10). Nevertheless, officers disregard her testimony and accept Dahmer’s explanation without verification.



**Figure 2.** Netflix, *Monster: Jeffrey Dahmer* first episode “episode 1” (36:18)

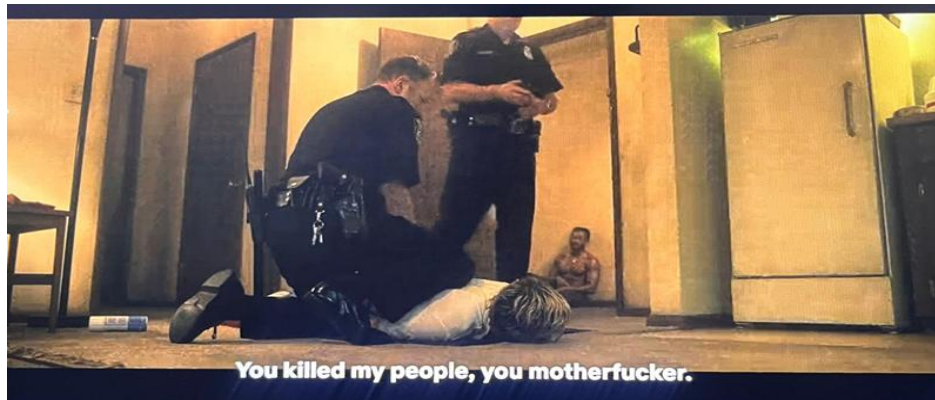
Similarly, in Episode 1, a Black resident expresses frustration by stating, “I called y’all... a million times” (36:15), indicating a pattern of ignored complaints. These scenes show that police officers consistently treat Black residents’ reports as exaggerated or unreliable, while granting immediate credibility to the white suspect’s narrative, even when it appears implausible or contradicted by physical evidence.

**Table 1.** Racial Prejudice in Policing Practices

<b>Racial Prejudice</b>	<b>Description of Findings</b>	<b>Scene Evidence</b>	<b>Analytic Interpretation</b>
<b>Racialized Credibility</b>	Testimony from Black residents is treated as less credible than that of white suspects.	Glenda Cleveland states the victim “looked like a child,” yet police dismiss her warning (Ep. 2 “Don’t Go,” 42:10–48:23).	Police credibility judgments are shaped by racial bias rather than observable evidence.
<b>Preferential Trust in Whiteness</b>	Police accept Dahmer’s explanation despite visible signs of harm to the victim	Officers accept Dahmer’s claim that Konerak is “his drunk boyfriend” (Ep. 2).	Whiteness functions as a default marker of innocence and reliability.
<b>Dismissal of Community Warnings</b>	Repeated reports from Black residents are framed as exaggerated or unreliable.	A Black resident protests, “I called y’all a million times” (Ep. 1, 36:17).	Black communities experience systematic credibility discounting.



## Systemic Racism and Institutional Neglect



**Figure 3.** Netflix, *Monster: Jeffrey Dahmer* episode 1 “Episode 1” (35:25)

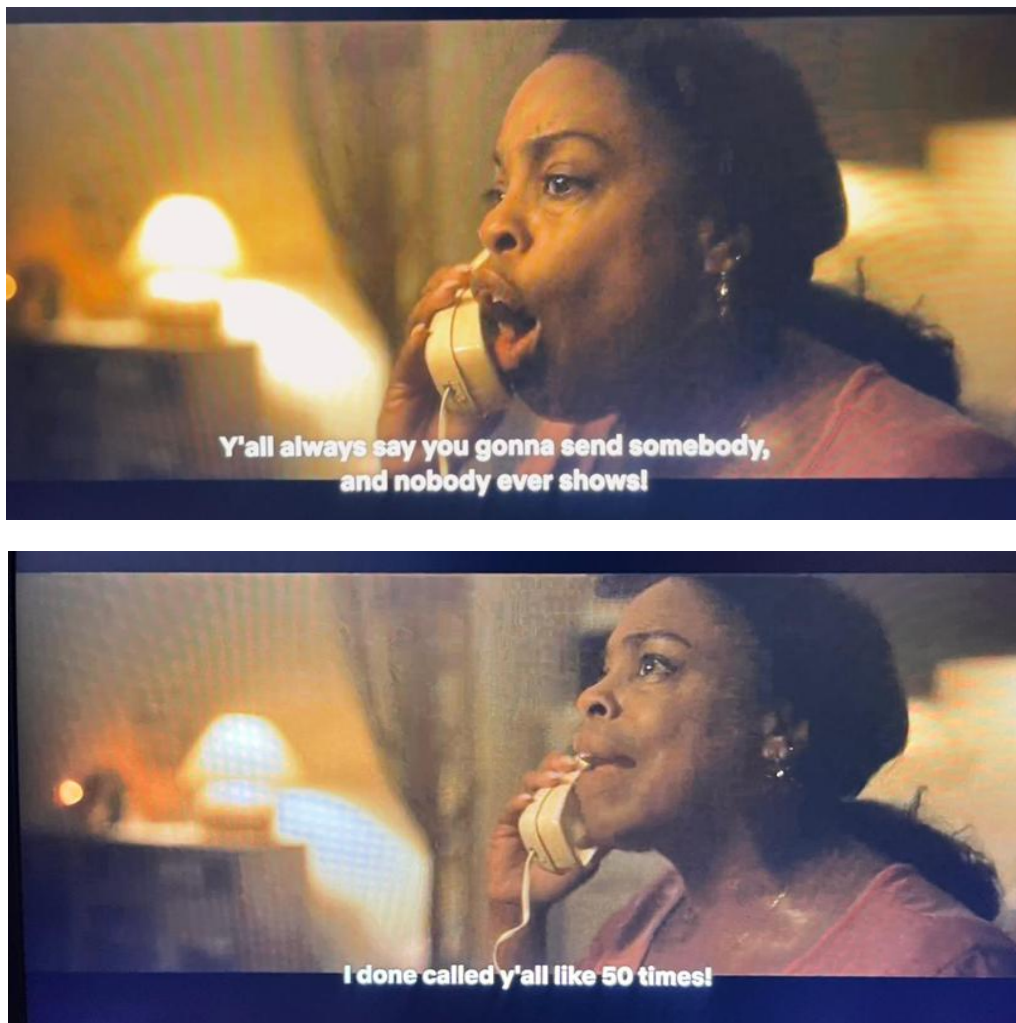
Beyond individual acts of bias, the series portrays systemic racism as a structural pattern embedded within law enforcement routines. Multiple episodes depict police failing to investigate reports of foul smells, screams, and suspicious activities in Dahmer’s apartment building, which is predominantly occupied by Black and working-class residents. These reports are repeatedly ignored or deprioritized without investigation.

Police intervention occurs only after Dahmer’s crimes become publicly undeniable, revealing that institutional protection is not equally distributed. Victims, primarily queer men of color from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, are implicitly treated as “non-priority cases.” The arrest scene in Episode 1 visually reinforces this pattern, as Dahmer is taken into custody while a wounded man of color remains neglected in the background.

**Table 2.** Systemic Racism and Institutional Neglect

Systemic Racism and Institutional Neglect	Description of Findings	Scene Evidence	Analytic Interpretation
<b>Institutional Inaction</b>	Police repeatedly fail to investigate reports from a predominantly Black neighborhood.	Multiple scenes showing ignored complaints about screams and odors (Ep. 1–2).	Neglect operates as a structural pattern, not isolated error.
<b>Unequal Distribution of Protection</b>	Authorities intervene only after violence becomes undeniable.	Dahmer is arrested while an injured man of color remains unattended (Ep. 1, 35:25).	State protection is unevenly distributed along racial lines.
<b>Intersectional Vulnerability</b>	Victims are framed as low-priority due to race, sexuality, and class.	Victims consistently portrayed as queer men of color from working-class backgrounds.	Multiple marginalized identities compound institutional neglect.

### Silenced Voices of Black Women



**Figure 4.** Netflix, *Monster: Jeffrey Dahmer*, episode 7 “Cassandra” (38:02)

In *Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story* (2022), the silencing of Black women’s voices emerges as a persistent and recurring representational pattern, most notably through the character of Glenda Cleveland. The series portrays how Black women’s attempts to exercise civic vigilance and community protection are systematically denied institutional legitimacy by law enforcement authorities.

Across multiple episodes, Cleveland is shown actively attempting to prevent harm by reporting Dahmer’s suspicious behavior. Nevertheless, her testimony is repeatedly dismissed, minimized, or ignored. This finding demonstrates that even when Black women’s testimony aligns with observable evidence, it fails to be recognized as credible within institutional decision-making processes. The series further depicts how Cleveland’s persistence, expressed through repeated phone calls and direct confrontations with law enforcement, is reframed as a nuisance or emotional excess rather than civic responsibility. In Episode 7 (“Cassandra”), the camera repeatedly lingers on Cleveland’s anxious and distressed facial expressions, while police officers respond with detached body language and visible disinterest. This visual contrast underscores that Black women’s voices are not only verbally dismissed but also symbolically marginalized through cinematic framing.

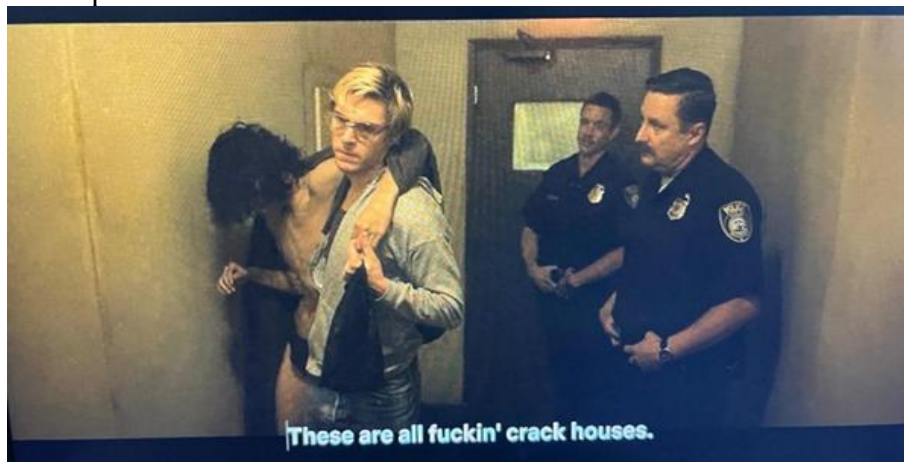
Taken together, these representations reveal a consistent pattern of institutional silencing: Black women speak, warn, and act, yet their voices are systematically excluded from structures of authority that claim to protect the public.

**Table 3.** Silenced Voice of Black Women

Silenced Voice of Black Women	Description of Findings	Scene Evidence	Analytic Interpretation
<b>Testimonial Dismissal</b>	Black women's warnings are ignored despite persistence and accuracy.	Cleveland's repeated calls to police remain unanswered (Ep. 2; Ep. 7 "Cassandra").	Black women's civic authority is institutionally undermined.
<b>Pathologization of Persistence</b>	Black women's concern is reframed as emotional excess or nuisance.	Cleveland portrayed as anxious and distressed rather than authoritative (Ep. 7, 38:02–38:15).	Emotional framing delegitimizes Black women's testimony.

### Class Inequality and Spatial Marginalization

*Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story* (2022) repeatedly situates Dahmer's crimes within a spatial context marked by economic deprivation and racial segregation. The series portrays Dahmer residing in a predominantly Black, working-class neighborhood that is explicitly framed as neglected, stigmatized, and socially disposable. This spatial setting is not merely a backdrop but functions as a key narrative element that shapes institutional responses to violence.



**Figure 5.** Netflix, *Monster: Jeffrey Dahmer*, episode 2 “Don’t Go” (42:59)

One recurring visual and narrative motif is the labeling of the neighborhood as a dangerous space, described through references to “Drug City” and the prevalence of “crack houses.” Such depictions reinforce the association between poverty, Blackness, and criminality. In Episode 2 (“Don’t Go”), a police officer’s remark, “What’s a guy like you doin’ living here?”, reveals how classed and racialized assumptions structure institutional perception. The question implicitly treats the neighborhood as an anomalous or suspicious place for a white man, while simultaneously normalizing the idea that crime and disorder are expected within poor, racialized spaces.

The series further demonstrates that residents of these marginalized areas receive uneven forms of state attention. Law enforcement is shown to maintain surveillance over the neighborhood while failing to provide meaningful protection. Reports of foul smells,



screams, and suspicious activity are repeatedly dismissed or left uninvestigated. This pattern suggests that institutional neglect is spatially organized: communities marked by poverty and racialization are policed as sites of control rather than safeguarded as sites of civic life.

Collectively, these scenes establish that class inequality and spatial marginalization operate together to render entire communities vulnerable. The neglect of Dahmer’s building and its residents is portrayed not as an isolated oversight but as a predictable outcome of structural disinvestment in low-income, racialized neighborhoods.

**Table 4.** Class Inequality and Spatial Marginalization

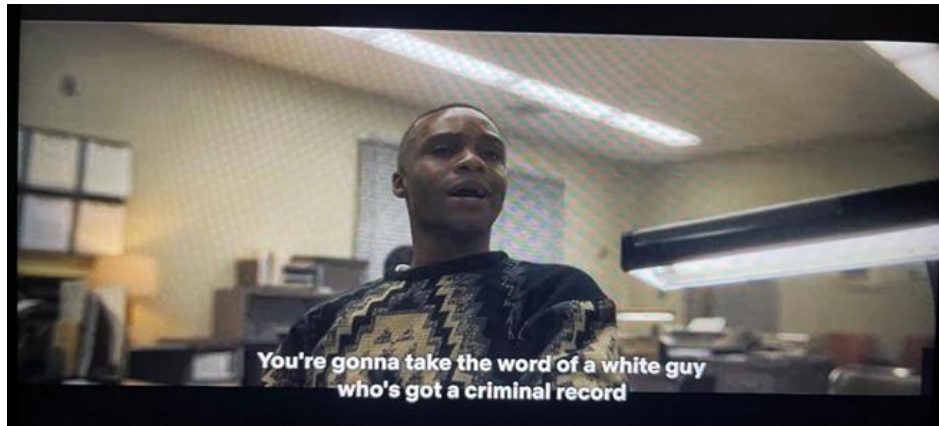
Class Inequality and Spatial Marginalization	Description of Findings	Scene Evidence	Analytic Interpretation
<b>Class-Based Devaluation</b>	Poor neighborhoods are treated as inherently unsafe and undeserving of care.	Officer asks Dahmer, “What’s a guy like you doin’ living here?” (Ep. 2, 42:59).	Class bias shapes assumptions about safety and legitimacy.
<b>Territorial Stigma</b>	Neighborhood labeled as “Drug City” and associated with disorder.	Visual depiction of deteriorated housing and drug activity (Ep. 2).	Space functions as a marker of social worth.

**Immigrant Victims and Citizenship-Based Inequality**



**Figure 6.** Netflix, *Monster: Jeffrey Dahmer* episode 5 “They Are Responsible For His Death” (51:16)

Immigrant families, especially Southeast Asian victims like Konerak Sinthasomphone, are shown standing silently in frustration during the courtroom sequences in Episode 5. The structural marginalization of non-white immigrants in the American judicial system is reflected in their lack of voice. According to research, non-citizens are typically viewed as less credible in court proceedings, receive lengthier sentences, and have less access to pretrial release (Zhang, 2021;Intifadah et al., 2025).



**Figure 7.** Netflix: Jeffrey Dahmer episode 5 “They Are Responsible For His Death” (34:43)

Another scene explicitly questions institutional credibility hierarchies when a character states, “You’re gonna take the word of a white guy with a criminal record over the word of a Black man with no record” (34:43). These scenes demonstrate how citizenship status and racial identity shape whose voices are considered legitimate within legal institutions.

**Table 5.** Immigrant Victims and Citizenship-Based Inequality

<b>Immigrant Victims and Citizenship-Based Inequality</b>	<b>Description of Findings</b>	<b>Scene Evidence</b>	<b>Analytic Interpretation</b>
<b>Immigrant Silencing</b>	Immigrant families remain voiceless in legal proceedings.	Silent Southeast Asian family in courtroom (Ep. 5, 51:16).	Legal visibility is stratified by citizenship.
<b>Citizenship Privilege</b>	White, native-born characters receive greater institutional legitimacy.	“You’re gonna take the word of a white guy...” (Ep. 5, 34:43).	Citizenship operates as epistemic authority.
<b>Intersectional Legal Marginality</b>	Race, class, and immigration status compound exclusion.	Courtroom scenes dominated by officials; immigrant families marginalized.	Legal systems reproduce hierarchical belonging

## DISCUSSION

This study demonstrates that *Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story* does not merely depict individual acts of violence but systematically exposes how institutional failure is produced through intersecting structures of race, class, gender, sexuality, and citizenship. Across the series, patterns of police neglect, testimonial dismissal, and selective empathy recur not as isolated misjudgments but as outcomes of entrenched institutional logics. Read through an intersectional lens, these failures reveal how vulnerability is structurally allocated and how state protection is unevenly distributed along racialized and classed lines.

### **Intersectionality and the Production of Institutional Vulnerability**

The findings indicate that Dahmer's victims, predominantly queer men of color from working-class and immigrant backgrounds, occupied intersecting positions of marginalization that heightened their exposure to violence while simultaneously limiting their access to institutional protection. In line with Crenshaw's (1989) theory of intersectionality, these vulnerabilities cannot be understood as separate or additive forms of disadvantage. Rather, race, sexuality, class, and legal status intersect to produce distinct forms of structural vulnerability, in which certain bodies are rendered socially disposable rather than institutionally protectable.

Within the series, this intersectional positioning is made visible through institutional categorization practices that repeatedly frame queer men of color as "non-priority cases." Such framing indicates that institutional responsiveness is not primarily determined by the severity or urgency of harm, but by embedded hierarchies of social value. Intersectionality thus operates not only at the level of victim identity but also through institutional perception, shaping how credibility, urgency, and legitimacy are differentially assigned. Victims positioned at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities are systematically denied recognition as subjects worthy of immediate protection.

Law enforcement responses in the series further demonstrate how institutional failure is normalized through intersecting racial, classed, and heteronormative logics. Police interactions are shaped by racialized assumptions of criminality, class-based stigmatization of marginalized neighborhoods, and heteronormative biases that devalue queer lives. These assumptions function together to justify inaction, rendering neglect an ordinary and bureaucratically acceptable response rather than an institutional breach. As a result, institutional failure appears routinized rather than exceptional, reinforcing patterns of delayed intervention, testimonial disbelief, and under-protection. This representation aligns with empirical research showing that marginalized populations are simultaneously over-surveilled and under-protected within contemporary policing practices (Carbado & Richardson, 2018; Lee, 2024).

From a post-national perspective, these dynamics expose the limits of the nation-state's claim to equal protection and universal justice. The series reveals that access to institutional care and legal recognition is mediated by racialized, classed, and citizenship-based hierarchies that undermine liberal narratives of national inclusivity. Rather than functioning as neutral guarantors of rights, institutions are shown to reproduce exclusionary regimes of belonging in which protection is unevenly distributed. In this sense, *Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story* operates as a cultural text that critiques institutional failure as a structurally produced condition rooted in intersecting systems of inequality, rather than as a series of isolated or individual errors.

### **Testimonial Injustice and the Silencing of Black Women**

The repeated dismissal of Glenda Cleveland's warnings exemplifies what Fricker (2007) conceptualizes as testimonial injustice, namely a systematic credibility deficit imposed on speakers as a result of social prejudice. The series demonstrates that Cleveland's testimony is consistently undermined through racialized and gendered stereotypes that frame Black women's concerns as exaggerated, emotional, or irrational. Although her warnings are empirically grounded and morally urgent, they are rendered institutionally irrelevant when positioned against the presumed credibility of a white male suspect. This contrast reveals that credibility within institutional settings is not evaluated

on evidentiary grounds alone but is structured by racialized and gendered hierarchies of trust.

The silencing of Black women's voices in the series can be more fully understood through the combined frameworks of intersectionality and epistemic injustice. Drawing on Crenshaw's (1989) theory, Cleveland occupies an intersectional position shaped by race, gender, and class, which collectively conditions how her testimony is received and evaluated. Her credibility is diminished not because of the content of her claims, but because her social location prefigures her as an unreliable epistemic subject within institutional logic. Intersectionality thus illuminates how testimonial injustice is produced through overlapping systems of power that regulate whose knowledge is recognized as legitimate.

Importantly, testimonial injustice in this context operates as an institutionalized practice rather than an interpersonal failure. Law enforcement actors repeatedly discount Cleveland's testimony in ways that appear routine and procedurally justified, revealing how epistemic exclusion is embedded within bureaucratic norms. The series illustrates that institutions pre-emptively sort speakers into categories of credibility and suspicion, ensuring that certain voices, particularly those of Black women, are systematically excluded from authoritative decision-making. As a result, institutional failure becomes normalized, as the dismissal of marginalized testimony is treated as standard professional judgment rather than as evidence of bias.

The privileging of Dahmer's account further exposes how institutional credibility is grounded in whiteness as a marker of national and civic legitimacy. Law enforcement's acceptance of a white male perpetrator's narrative over a Black woman's testimony demonstrates how national institutions reproduce racial hierarchies under the appearance of neutrality. This dynamic aligns with Bell's (1992) theory of interest convergence, in which institutional action aligns with dominant white interests, while the safety and knowledge of marginalized communities are rendered expendable (Collins, 2021). Read through a post-national lens, the series challenges the assumption that national institutions function as impartial guarantors of justice, revealing instead that epistemic recognition and institutional protection are contingent upon racialized, gendered, and classed belonging within the nation-state.

### **Spatial Marginalization, Class Inequality, and Territorial Stigma**

The analysis further demonstrates that spatial marginalization operates as a constitutive extension of racial and class-based inequality rather than as a neutral or incidental backdrop to violence. Dahmer's residence in a stigmatized, predominantly Black working-class neighborhood functions as a key narrative mechanism through which institutional neglect is produced and rendered intelligible. The repeated designation of the area as "Drug City" exemplifies what Wacquant conceptualizes as territorial stigma, wherein physical space is imbued with moral judgments that mark it as inherently deviant, dangerous, and socially disposable. Through this spatial coding, the neighborhood is pre-constructed as a site where harm is expected and intervention is unnecessary, thereby normalizing institutional inaction.

From an intersectional perspective, spatial marginalization intensifies vulnerability by binding race, class, and place into a mutually reinforcing matrix of exclusion. The series illustrates that residents are not marginalized solely because they are poor or racialized, but because their social identities are inseparable from spaces already marked as unworthy of protection. Intersectionality thus reveals how spatial stigma compounds racial and class-based inequality, transforming neighborhoods into



zones of diminished institutional obligation. Within these zones, violence becomes less legible as a crisis and more legible as an anticipated outcome of the social environment itself.

Moreover, spatial marginalization functions as a mechanism of epistemic regulation within institutional decision-making. Reports, complaints, and warnings originating from stigmatized neighborhoods are pre-emptively discounted, not because of evidentiary weakness, but because of assumptions attached to the space and its inhabitants. Territorial stigma therefore operates as an epistemic filter that structures credibility in advance, determining which forms of knowledge are recognized as actionable and which are dismissed as routine noise. This process reinforces cycles of neglect by ensuring that institutional responses prioritize surveillance and control over care and protection. Empirical research supports this pattern, showing that place-based stigma systematically reduces institutional responsiveness while legitimizing aggressive policing strategies (Maxwell, 2018; Taggart, 2022).

Importantly, the series suggests that spatial marginalization does not merely reflect institutional failure but actively produces it. By framing marginalized neighborhoods as inherently disordered, institutions are absolved of responsibility for harm occurring within them. Neglect is rearticulated as reasonable judgment rather than structural abandonment. In this way, spatial stigma becomes a governing logic that enables violence by lowering expectations of institutional intervention and accountability.

Viewed through a post-national lens, these dynamics expose the limits of national narratives that presume equal protection and uniform citizenship across civic space. The uneven distribution of institutional care reveals that belonging within the nation-state is spatially stratified, with marginalized neighborhoods positioned at the periphery of civic and moral concern. Rather than functioning as neutral guarantors of public safety, national institutions are shown to reproduce spatial hierarchies of worth that undermine claims of universal justice. Normatively, this pattern raises critical questions about the ethical legitimacy of institutions that selectively allocate protection, suggesting that systemic neglect in marginalized spaces constitutes not merely administrative failure but a form of structural injustice embedded within national governance. *Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story* thus visualizes how spatial marginalization and class inequality operate as structural conditions that enable violence by rendering entire communities institutionally invisible, both materially and epistemically.

### **Citizenship, Post-Nationalism, and Hierarchies of Belonging**

The courtroom scenes involving immigrant families, particularly Southeast Asian victims, foreground citizenship status as a crucial axis of exclusion within the operation of legal institutions. Viewed through a post-national American Studies lens, these representations reveal how legal belonging and national identity fundamentally shape whose suffering is rendered visible, credible, and deserving of institutional recognition. Immigrant victims and their families are depicted as physically present within judicial spaces yet politically and epistemically absent, reinforcing existing scholarship that documents the systematic marginalization of non-citizens in legal processes (Zhang, 2021). Their silence is not incidental but structurally produced, reflecting how national institutions delimit participation and voice along the boundaries of citizenship.

From an intersectional perspective, this exclusion cannot be reduced to immigration status alone but emerges through the interaction of race, class, and legal belonging. Racialized immigrant families are positioned at the intersection of multiple

forms of marginalization that collectively undermine their epistemic and legal standing. Their testimonies and emotional claims are rendered peripheral, while institutional authority remains concentrated in figures marked by whiteness, citizenship, and social legitimacy. Intersectionality thus reveals how legal invisibility is intensified when non-citizenship converges with racialization and economic precarity.

Within this framework, whiteness and citizenship function as forms of institutional capital that grant presumptive credibility and moral legitimacy. Conversely, racialized immigrants are constructed as suspect, voiceless, or disposable within judicial narratives. This hierarchy of belonging illustrates how the American justice system continues to operate through exclusionary national logics that contradict liberal claims of equal protection under the law. Rather than serving as a neutral arbiter, the legal system is shown to reproduce boundaries of inclusion and exclusion that privilege national insiders over marginalized others.

By exposing these dynamics, the series challenges narratives of American exceptionalism that presume fairness, universality, and equal access to justice. Read through post-national and intersectional lenses, *Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story* reveals how national identity intersects with race and class to structure legal recognition and moral worth, demonstrating that justice within the nation-state remains contingent upon hierarchies of belonging rather than grounded in universal principles. Normatively, this condition raises ethical concerns regarding the legitimacy of legal systems that selectively recognize suffering, suggesting that the exclusion of immigrant voices constitutes a form of structural injustice rather than a procedural limitation.

### Systemic Failure In Intersectional Lens

Taken together, the portrayals in *Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story* indicate that institutional failure is not an accidental or isolated phenomenon, but a recurring pattern shaped by structural inequality. The series repeatedly shows how institutions dismiss the concerns of Black women, deprioritize queer men of color, and marginalize immigrant families. These patterns suggest that the criminal justice system operates through intersecting considerations of race, gender, class, and citizenship, which influence whose voices are acknowledged and whose lives are protected. Rather than centering Dahmer's crimes solely as individual acts of violence, the series positions systemic neglect as a key condition that allowed such violence to persist.

From an intersectional perspective, these failures are not simply cumulative but mutually reinforcing. The silencing of Black women's testimony, the neglect of queer men of color, and the exclusion of immigrant victims intersect to produce heightened vulnerability for those occupying multiple marginalized positions. Drawing on Crenshaw's framework, the series demonstrates that institutional responses are shaped by overlapping forms of exclusion that prevent certain victims from being recognized as fully legitimate subjects of protection. As a result, institutional inaction appears less as a mistake and more as a predictable outcome of how vulnerability is socially organized.

This pattern is particularly evident in the series' depiction of institutionalized disbelief. Glenda Cleveland's repeatedly ignored warnings illustrate how marginalized communities are treated as unreliable sources of knowledge, even when their concerns are consistent and well-founded. Her reports are dismissed as exaggeration rather than acted upon as credible information, revealing how credibility is unevenly distributed within institutional settings. Such disbelief reflects broader structural tendencies within institutions to undervalue the testimony of women and racial minorities, reinforcing cycles of neglect and delayed intervention (Nielsen, 2022).

**Table 6.** Systemic Failure In Intersectional Lens

Systemic Failure In Intersectional Lens	Description	Scene Evidence	Interpretation
Institutionalized Disbelief	Testimony from marginalized groups is dismissed.	Glenda Cleveland's ignored calls (Ep. 2 & Ep. 7).	Shows systemic patterns of discrediting Black women.
Intersectional Vulnerability	Multiple marginalized identities intensify harm.	Queer men of color, Black women, immigrant families across episodes.	Oppression multiplies across race, gender, sexuality, citizenship
Selective Empathy	Institutions grant credibility unevenly.	Court prioritizing white narratives (Ep. 5).	Reveals racialized hierarchy of whose suffering matters
Structural Invisibility	Immigrant victims rendered unheard.	Silent Southeast Asian family (Ep. 5, 51:16).	Citizenship status reduces institutional visibility.
Systemic Inequality	Failures rooted in biased structures, not isolated acts.	Police neglect seen repeatedly throughout the series.	Confirms institutional racism/classism as structural norms.

Viewed through a post-national lens, these dynamics challenge assumptions of equal citizenship and impartial justice within national institutions. The limited visibility of immigrant victims, particularly in courtroom scenes where Southeast Asian families remain silent and peripheral, highlights how access to recognition and protection is shaped by national belonging. Institutional authority is shown to privilege certain narratives while excluding others, reproducing racialized and citizenship-based hierarchies under the appearance of neutrality. In this sense, *Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story* underscores that systemic failure is not a breakdown of institutional function, but part of its routine operation. This reading provides a critical foundation for the conclusion that institutional neglect, rather than individual deviance alone, plays a central role in shaping patterns of violence and injustice depicted in the series.

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to broadening the scope of American Studies and media scholarship by demonstrating how popular culture, specifically true crime narratives like *Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story* can serve as a critical site for analyzing structural racism, class inequality, and institutional failure in contemporary American society. By employing intersectionality and Post-National American Studies as analytical frameworks, this research bridges the gap between cultural representation and systemic critique, showing that media texts not only reflect but also reinforce existing power hierarchies. The study's significance also extends to its methodological intervention: it portrays entertainment media as a legitimate object of academic inquiry capable of revealing how institutions, through biased portrayals and selective empathy, perpetuate social injustice. Ultimately, this research underscores the importance of reading media representations as mirrors of societal structures,

encouraging scholars and audiences alike to critically engage with the narratives that normalize racialized and class-based disparities within the American justice system.

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that *Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story* (2022) functions as a critical cultural text through which race and class shape the portrayal of victims, institutional responses, and audience interpretation. The findings demonstrate that victims who are Black, queer, immigrant, and working-class are consistently depicted as less visible and less credible, mirroring how social marginalization structures vulnerability within both the narrative and the institutions represented. Through repeated scenes of testimonial dismissal and police inaction, the series reveals how systemic racism and class inequality determine whose suffering is recognized and whose lives are afforded institutional protection.

Moreover, the series frames institutional failure as an outcome of intersecting oppressions rather than individual misconduct. Law enforcement and judicial systems are shown to extend legitimacy and trust to white, middle-class actors while disregarding warnings from marginalized communities, reinforcing racialized and classed hierarchies of credibility. This narrative configuration shapes audience interpretation by directing empathy unevenly and normalizing selective institutional concern. By foregrounding these dynamics, this study contributes to American Studies and media scholarship by demonstrating how true crime media both exposes and risks reproducing structural inequality, underscoring the need to critically engage popular media as a site where systemic injustice is narrated and made intelligible.

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