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Queering and Crippling the End of the World

Disability, Sexuality and Race in The Walking Dead

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Since its 2010 debut on AMC, the television show *The Walking Dead*¹ has garnered vast popular and critical attention. Embedded within the contemporary obsession with a zombie apocalypse, the show is part of a broader cultural project seeking collective ways to navigate a post-2008 imploded capitalist system that many economically vulnerable and privileged populations are still experiencing as “the end of the world.” In doing so, the show raises questions about post-apocalyptic racialization, kinship ties in the absence of social institutions to finance them, and intimacies that include cannibalism, disembowelment, and homosocial/homoerotic zombie orgies. Bringing queer disability studies to bear on the show, in this essay I ask how disability, race, and sexuality intertwine in *The Walking Dead* to reflect histories of zombie representation as well as anxieties over early 21st century neoliberal capitalism.

While many scholars have examined the racial and colonial politics of zombie constructions,² little work has examined how popular representations of zombies reflect norms of ability and disability. This is a problematic omission in existing literature as the links between zombification and diverse forms of embodiment are encoded into the visual representation of the walking dead. In popular culture, zombies and people with disabilities are constructed in problematically similar ways: communication practices, gait, and cognitive reasoning skills attached

to zombie representations mirror those attached to depictions of people with autism, cerebral palsy, and other various disabilities. Simultaneously mapping disability onto the living dead, and mapping death-in-life onto people with disabilities, zombie culture contains some deeply troubling ableism. Yet here I ask how a more radical queer crip reading is possible, one that values the ways compulsory able-bodiedness, compulsory whiteness, and compulsory heterosexuality are questioned, troubled, and ultimately challenged within one particular zombie cultural production. Doing so requires drawing on the burgeoning field of queer disability studies, an interdisciplinary and radical social justice-oriented field of inquiry. Queer disability studies does not just look for the queer, disabled characters in a given text or history, seeking to bring them out from invisibility and into the light. Rather, queer disability studies critically interrogates the social construction and intertwining of heterosexuality, able-bodiedness, white supremacy, and patriarchy, revealing the ways power and hegemony are at work in the ways they currently animate social and political life.³

I demonstrate here that in *The Walking Dead*, “queer” has little to do with who (or what) characters have sex with and much more to do with anti-normativity. Indeed, the queer elements of *The Walking Dead* are found in the practices, embodiments, and desires that resist white, bourgeois heteronormativity and its attendant demands, while simultaneously revealing their centrality in both viral zombie narratives and contemporary neoliberalism. In this sense, queerness in the show is always an intersectional constellation, as race, gender, sexuality, and disability intertwine.

Viral Politics in Zombie Capitalism

A number of cultural studies scholars have sought to make sense of the current zombie obsession in U.S. popular media by attributing it to the 2008 economic collapse and consequent recession. Henry Giroux, for example, writes eloquently about “zombie capitalism,” a form of global neoliberalism that has created a new world order that “views competition as a form of social combat, celebrates war as an extension of politics, and legitimates a ruthless Social Darwinism in which particular individuals and groups are considered simply redundant, disposable ... easy prey for the zombies” (Giroux 2). For Giroux, it is the 1 percent and their institutions (to use the language of the Occupy Movement) that

are the zombies, as their ideologies spread through contemporary culture and politics like a virus, infecting the rest of us 99 percent in the process. David McNally also mobilizes the viral zombie metaphor to explain global neoliberal capitalism, but for him it is the exploited who are the walking dead: "those disfigured creatures, frequently depicted as zombies, who have been turned into *mere bodies*, unthinking and exploitable collections of flesh, blood, muscle and tissue" through the processes of alienated labor and commodity fetishism (McNally 4, emphasis in original). While these economic explanations for the zombie revival are convincing in many ways, their primary focus on political economy often fails to engage with the explicit ways that race, sexuality, and disability shape both how global capitalism operates and how the viral zombie functions to knit together political, cultural, and economic anxieties.

The Walking Dead demonstrates the ways these cultural, political, and economic concerns feed each other. The show takes place in a post-apocalyptic Atlanta, Georgia, overrun by zombies called "walkers." A mutated virus has been introduced to the human population that causes them to turn into zombies upon their death, after which they attack and consume humans for food. The show follows a core group of human survivors as they struggle to stay alive, avoid the walkers, and figure out how to maintain social bonds in a world largely absent of the political and economic institutions that are designed to support them. The few human survivors, led by the straight, white patriarchal sheriff Rick, must navigate a state-less, service-less world that even capital seems to have abandoned, drawing only on their own strengths and bootstrap-agencies for assistance. In many ways, *The Walking Dead's* setting, while hyperbolic, embodies a logic that is central to neoliberal capitalism: privatization of social services and basic human needs is enabled through the withdrawal of public state support, and individuals are left to fend for themselves in a hostile world with only their ambitions and families on which to draw. In this way, Giroux and McNally are correct in their assessment of neoliberal global capitalism's zombie production. *The Walking Dead* offers us a world in which there are no working banks, grocery stores, apartment buildings, or schools even though the buildings that housed these public institutions litter the landscape, haunting and taunting the human survivors in their lack of safety. In post-apocalyptic Atlanta, only independent, able-bodied, virile folks are imagined to be able to survive while those whose embodiments or identities are interdependent with others and with a social safety net face death

or abandonment. As Robert McRuer and Abby Wilkerson argue, neoliberalism disproportionately harms populations that have historically been positioned to rely more heavily upon public services—such as people with disabilities, poor people, queers, trans* people,⁴ immigrants, and women—while it simultaneously enshrines the heterosexual nuclear family as the "proper" private location of support (McRuer and Wilkerson 3).⁵ In neoliberalism, unpaid labor in the heterosexual family by spouses, parents, and children is understood to substitute for public support, and marginalized populations are expected to invest in the heterosexual nuclear form as a safeguard against poverty and death. In *The Walking Dead*, these populations similarly face potential annihilation as those who are elderly, have physical or cognitive disabilities, are pregnant, or cannot or will not attack zombies with weapons are quickly killed or abandoned. The tenuous kinship ties still remaining are expected to provide for basic human needs. All of the groups represented as "families" in the show are either heterosexual couples or children and parents related through heterosexual unions. While the entire group of survivors shares some of the affects and practices associated with "family" in its heteronormative sense (economic interdependence, primary affective bonds, and shared domestic space, for example), heterosexual couples and child/parent units are granted primacy over the group as a whole, leaving the heteronuclear family intact even in a post-apocalyptic world that in many ways might seem to require a more expansive and heterogeneous network of kinship and community. The ultimate neoliberal world, *The Walking Dead* reveals the centrality of disability and sexuality to global capitalism, even when that political economy has been annihilated.

Zombies as Others, Others as Zombies

If disability and sexuality shape the ways humans navigate the show's landscape, they also dovetail with race to construct the ubiquitous antagonist of the show: the viral zombie. Kristin Ostherr and Priscilla Wald have demonstrated that zombie narratives since the Cold War have heavily drawn on virology, as virology offers a ripe metaphor for cultural paranoia over potentially "infectious" people and ideas that could move undetected through supposedly "normal" populations. In these viral zombie narratives, anxiety over the loss of humanity has been represented as a theft of the body—which can be seen, for example, in novels

and films such as *Last Man on Earth* (1964), *The Omega Man* (1971), and the recent *I Am Legend* remake (2007) starring Will Smith fighting viral zombies, all adapted from Richard Matheson's Cold War novel *I Am Legend* (1954).

The viral zombie also has a specifically racial, sexual, and disability history even as disability seems to be largely absent from most critical analysis. The zombie has roots in Afro-Haitian spiritual traditions and the zombie's blackness has historically been central to the horror it produces in the white United States imaginary. Drawing on racialized histories, zombies are often represented as mindless bodies, staggering around and often maimed, unable to fully communicate or participate in the social contract. In this way they join the list of marginalized populations who have similarly been constructed as the "others" against which the (neo)liberal social contract has been defined—most notably women, people of color, queers, trans* people, and people with disabilities.⁶ Significantly these groups have been excluded precisely through their imagined lack of rationality and interdependence (rather than independence), as well as their embodiments that exceed white, cisgendered,⁷ able-bodied norms. These historical constructions are deeply imbricated in popular constructions of viral zombies, particularly within *The Walking Dead*.

The specifically Afro-Haitian history of the zombie, which lurks in the shadows of all zombie representations including those on *The Walking Dead*, render even more clear the intertwining of sexuality, disability, and race. For example, the show explains the zombies as infected with a virus that brings death and life-in-death. Viral narratives in popular culture often mobilize sexual and racial panics that locate disease, disability, and death in sexually and racially "othered" bodies. In *The Walking Dead*, the zombie's historical racialization as Afro-Haitian and alignment with "improper" desire that can spread a virus to unsuspecting and undeserving humans raises the specter of HIV/AIDS and draws on even while it disavows this connection.

For example, in the first season the survivors head to the Centers for Disease Control, assuming that answers about the virus and zombies would be available there if anywhere. After meeting with the head researcher in charge of eradicating the zombie virus, Edwin Jenner, the group learns that no cure has been found, even though French scientists had come close. In choosing to highlight the CDC and American-French viral research relationships, the writers of the show invoke the specific history of the AIDS pandemic, as both played key roles in publicizing

HIV/AIDS in its early years (often with highly discriminatory effects) and constructing viral origin and transmission narratives that became the dominant ones circulating today. French and U.S. scientists share credit for discovering that HIV is the virus that leads to AIDS (Wald 244–45), and it was the CDC played a key role in associating certain scapegoated populations with HIV/AIDS and encouraging bans on specific populations donating blood (Treichler 47–60; Bayer and Feldman 20–27).

In the early years of the AIDS pandemic, Haitians (and later, African Americans) were targeted by the CDC and other health agencies as especially dangerous vectors of HIV, and in public health policy, immigration law, and popular cultural representation they were depicted as the "walking dead"—technically alive but soon-to-be-dead infected bodies capable of contaminating and killing "good unsuspecting Americans" who were white and middle class. This framework also shaped how Haitian immigrant women were positioned, as their reproductive and sexual practices were understood by the U.S. state to be capable of infecting the body politic with the HIV virus (Hannabach 32–35). Intertwining Haitian, gay male, and female subjects through their presumed shared "bad blood" that could spread viral disability in the form of AIDS, such histories reveal the ways the zombie has long been constructed through race, sexuality, and disability.

This historical construction heavily shapes how *The Walking Dead* represents both zombies and humans. What separates the zombies from the humans then is that the zombies are ruled by a need for human flesh that in the logic of the show is coded as anti-social. While the heterosexual desire valued on the show is also a desire for human flesh and a type of communion through that fleshly encounter, the zombies are constructed as different in the effects their desire has on their object: death. If heteronormativity and its attendant gender, racial, and class ideologies require a fleshly desire that reproduces heteronormativity in the form of children (presumed to grow up to be straight and start the process again), the zombies enact a rather queer form of desire and reproduction. The compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory able-bodiedness that bind the show's humans together are entirely irrelevant to the zombies, whose desire for fleshy consumption defies gender, sexual, and familial boundaries. Zombified wives attack their human husbands, zombified adults rip apart their own children (and vice versa), and zombies of all genders descend in bloody orgies to satiate their cravings for consumption, sexual mores be damned. Essentially, the compulsory sexual norms structuring

U.S. society no longer bind the zombies nor shape their desires, even as the human survivors cling to them. Indeed, the zombies quite explicitly refuse marriage ties, coupledness, childrearing, and gender norms, desiring instead some rather queer corporeal communion and reproducing not through heterosexual intercourse but rather through promiscuous orgies of flesh and blood with bodies of all genders. The HIV/AIDS metaphor codes the zombie virus as a challenge to heteronormativity in ways similar to AIDS narratives that blamed the virus on sexually deviant bodies, including gay men (Wald), Haitian mothers (Hannabach), and sex workers (Treichler).

Heteronormativity is not the only social norm that the zombies of *The Walking Dead* violate, however. Robert McRuer writes that "compulsory heterosexuality is intertwined with compulsory able-bodiedness; both systems work to (re)produce the able body and heterosexuality. But precisely because these systems depend on a queer/disabled existence that can never quite be contained, able-bodied heterosexuality's hegemony is always in danger of collapse" (McRuer 31). Quite literally, the zombies are the constitutive outside of the human, they are what the humans are defined against, and the zombies' sexual and reproductive practices are a key component of what renders them inhuman in this world.

Not only do the zombies perform a version of queer disability, they trouble the boundaries separating queer from straight, disabled from able-bodied, and human from inhuman. Further, they reveal the ways that disability functions differently for different kinds of subjects. For example, *The Walking Dead's* white men are continually rendered disabled through traumatic injury, yet this form of disability is "overcome" to avoid threatening white patriarchal heterosexuality. The show opens with the straight white male protagonist Rick in the hospital, waking from the coma he fell into after being shot. Staggering out of the hospital, still weak and injured, Rick realizes that his wife Lori and son Carl are missing, the city is seemingly empty of humans, and blood-thirsty zombies are running amok. It turns out that Lori and Carl have escaped with Shane, another sheriff who is Rick's partner, and are camped out in the woods with several other survivors. Thinking Rick dead, Lori and Shane begin a sexual relationship that is depicted as partly out of desire for each other and partly out of a desire to have Shane fill the open role of Carl's father, thus preserving the heterosexual nuclear family in the midst of chaos. The show essentially begins in a place of straight white male disability, which is overcome through Rick's reclamation of his physical

strength, leadership abilities, and heterosexual family. Later on, Rick and his newly reclaimed wife and son join up with a few other human survivors to form the core group of protagonists. Eventually confronting Shane about his affair with Lori, Rick further solidifies his right of sexual access to Lori as well as his control over the reproduction of white masculinity exemplified by his relationship with his son Carl.

Unlike Rick's law-and-order form of straight white masculinity, another of the core group members, Merle, embodies a specifically racist, misogynist, and homophobic "white-trash" form of masculinity. After repeatedly harassing the women and people of color in the group, threatening the group's survival, Merle is handcuffed to a rooftop by Rick and left to die by the women and T-Dog, an African American man who Merle had a history of attacking. To avoid being eaten by zombies, Merle is forced to cut off his hand, rendering him an amputee who eventually finds and joins the suburban enclave of Woodbury, which is introduced in Season 3 and which I address below. Merle's amputation, while represented as traumatic, does not threaten his masculinity or white supremacist claims to bodily and cognitive superiority. In fact, while in the town of Woodbury Merle devises a weaponized prosthetic that he uses to attack zombies and threaten human characters—the prosthetic consists of a metal tube with a bayonet attached to the end, essentially turning his amputated arm into a stabbing phallus. In Woodbury, Merle uses this prosthetic to attack Glenn, an Asian American man who belongs to the core group of protagonists, as well as help the Governor of Woodbury sexually assault Maggie,⁸ another member of the core group and Glenn's girlfriend. Essentially, the amputation that might have challenged Merle's claim to violent white heterosexual masculinity is "overcome" through technology that in fact bolsters and expands the violent ways such an institution can manifest.

There are a number of other instances of white male disability throughout the show, and all are presented as sudden and unexpected. For all of these characters, disability and bodily disruption are experienced as a break in their normal life course, a sudden interruption to the physical abilities, sexual access, and economic future to which straight white masculinity has historically been granted entitlement. The trauma each of these characters experiences is predicated upon not expecting disability to play a role in their life, at least until old age. In some ways, the zombie apocalypse might even be seen to allay fears of disability in old age, as the human characters don't even know if they will live that long. Further, rather than challenge the sexual, racial, and

corporeal norms governing the world of *The Walking Dead*, these experiences of disability all shore up such norms. As David Serlin argues in *Replaceable You*, people with disabilities or with bodies considered “different” can often be reincorporated into the body politic through prosthetic and other medical technologies that have historically been made available to white men (Serlin 2). However, what about disabled bodies that do not have access to these technologies of social incorporation? Those irredeemably queer bodies, those bodies that are rendered the constitutive outside to the social, and whose disabilities are rendered not through sudden, unexpected traumatic injury but rather through historical processes of racialization, sexualization, and gendering enjoy no such reincorporation.

In contrast to the white men who experience disability as sudden and surmountable, the women and people of color in the show are disabled in more structural and sustained ways. Lori, who is entirely defined in relation to the men in her life (Rick’s wife, Carl’s mother, Shane’s lover), becomes pregnant during the second season and is unsure of the fetus’s father. Her pregnancy is presented as “disabling” both her and the rest of the group, as it is the reason why characters are forced to risk their lives obtaining pregnancy tests and baby formula, the reason why the group cannot move as quickly or as strategically as the male leaders desire, and the reason why Rick and Shane fight with each other. Eventually, Lori’s pregnancy is presented as the reason why Lori’s son Carl is forced to kill his mother, to save the baby and prevent its zombification. Lori’s dependency upon the group is attributed to her pregnancy, and sets her apart from the other women characters. While almost all of the women on the show are dependent upon men for survival, support, and basic human existence, pregnancy in particular is pathologized. Feminist scholars have been right to critique the pathologizing ways pregnancy has historically been constructed as a disabling condition in legal and cultural frameworks that take white masculinity as their norm (Samuels 55–56). However, feminist disability studies scholars have also pointed out that this critique also often leaves intact the ableist assumption “that disability is inherently contaminating and that certain bodily conditions themselves are disabling” (Hall 6). In the framework of the show, women in general and pregnant women in particular are rendered disabled not in the sudden, surmountable ways the white men are, but rather in their very constitution by the social order that defines them as dependent.

Relatedly, the African American characters on the show are disabled in ways quite different from the white characters. In *Social Death*:

Racialized Rightlessness and the Criminalization of the Unprotected, Lisa Marie Cacho argues that “disease and disability figure centrally whenever there is the need to represent state-sanctioned violence as necessary for national survival [because] disability is the language of devaluation, contagion, and control” (69). In the history of U.S. law and culture, queerness, non-binary gender, and non-whiteness have been construed as disabilities that justified state and extra-state intervention.⁹ Unlike the white characters on the show who suddenly become disabled yet have their sexual and gender propriety remain intact, the African American characters are positioned as constitutive “others” who must be eliminated or managed in much the same way diseases are. In all three seasons of the show broadcast so far, African American men have been killed, harmed, and incarcerated disproportionately to the white characters (men and women both). For the most part the show itself is entirely uninterested in interrogating the racism at work in this representation. However, a brief scene in Season 2 opens the possibility for critique even as it shuts it down. In “Bloodletting,” the second episode of the season, T-Dog and the other characters realize that a wound T-Dog had suffered when cutting his arm on a rusted car frame has become infected. The blood infection has been getting worse, and T-Dog begins to fear for his survival. Significantly, his fear focuses not only on the zombies but white humans and their historical propensity for racist violence. Speaking with Dale, the older white grandfather-type of the group, T-Dog notes the precarity of both blackness and disability in the neoliberal zombie world:

T-DOG: “They think we’re the weakest. What are you? 70?”

DALE: “64.”

T-DOG: “And I’m the one black guy. You realize how precarious that makes my situation?”

Dale: “What the hell are you talking about?”

T-DOG: “I’m talking about two good-ol’-boys cowboy sheriffs [Rick and Shane] and a redneck [Dale] whose brother [Merle] cut off his own hand.... Who in that scenario do you think is going to be the first to get lynched?”

This scene is exceptional in its direct address of structural racism and white supremacy, as well as the ways it links both to ableism. T-Dog correctly notes that black bodies have always had more to fear from the white state than the other way around, given the histories of racialized slavery, mass lynchings, and criminalization/incarceration—all of which have been justified as protecting white, heteronuclear families from black male threats. Similarly, he links race to disability, noting the ways dis-

ability in the form of Dale's old age and his own blood poisoning make them likely targets of violence from the other white characters, as well as the neoliberal world itself. Dale here speaks as the "good white liberal" who cannot believe that race and disability would matter in the biopolitical context of the apocalypse (partly because he cannot understand racism and ableism as structural, as something other than individual prejudice), but T-Dog points out that racism and disability have always grounded U.S. state practices and heteronormative community formations, as well as histories of visual representation. Zombies or no zombies, black life has always been rendered precarious in the U.S. state and visual culture even as that black precarity has grounded the construction of the white, bourgeois heteronuclear family. Black people have historically been enslaved, tortured, lynched, murdered, raped, and incarcerated so that white heterosexual family life can be enshrined. Similarly, compulsory able-bodiness lives at the heart of U.S. politics and culture. In a rare moment of explicit critique, T-Dog and the show itself forces viewers to confront the ways race, sexuality, and disability dovetail not merely in the fictional and futural world of the zombie apocalypse, or even in the present day world of the viewers, but across the entire history of the United States. Just when we think the show might be opening up space to critique the ideologies that thus far the show seems deeply invested in maintaining, the moment is closed down. Dale reduces T-Dog's structural critique to hallucinations caused by a fever, and the show cuts over to the white characters' escapades in the woods. At the end of this remarkable scene, ultimately structural racism and ableism are reduced to the delusional fantasies of a black disabled man in need of cure. Despite this attempt at foreclosure though, the show can't manage to entirely erase the lingering effects of T-Dog's radical and structural critique of compulsory white heteronormativity and its attendant compulsory able-bodiness. T-Dog is eventually killed off, as are all of the black male characters, save one—Tyreese—as of the time of this writing (the end of Season 3). Yet his critique seems to haunt the show's subsequent episodes, demonstrating how possibilities for resistance to the show's ideologies lurk within the very fabric of visual culture itself.

*Sexual Politics and Queer Crip Possibilities*¹⁰

If T-Dog's scene opens up a critique that even the apparatus of the show can't entirely close down, the representation of another African

American character—Michonne—further explores the queer crip possibilities at work in *The Walking Dead*. It is true that *The Walking Dead* is deeply invested in heteronormativity and seems unable to deal substantially with explicitly gay, lesbian, or bisexual identities. Indeed, there are neither self-identified LGBTQ characters nor same-gender sexual encounters in three seasons of the show, leaving viewers with the impression that the show's producers think that all the queers in the prominent gay tourism location of "Hot-lanta" have either been eaten by zombies or become zombies themselves. No self-identified queer characters in Atlanta seems about as plausible as the extremely low number of African American characters in a city that is known for its very large and vibrant LGBTQ and African American populations.¹¹ However, just because there are no self-identified LGBTQ characters does not mean there are no queers, any more than the fact that nobody saying the word "disabled" on the show means that disability is absent. Indeed, if a queer crip reading of the show looks for and values moments when heteronormativity, white supremacy, and compulsory able-bodiness are troubled and exceeded, the character of Michonne offers some incredibly rich queer crip pleasures. From her introduction to the series all the way through her every scene, Michonne remains the most resistant and "othered" body on the show. Simultaneously marked as African American, queer, butch, and disabled, Michonne represents all that the show seems to be working against. Yet because of this she provides one of the clearest examples of the tenuousness of compulsory heterosexuality, compulsory able-bodiness, and compulsory whiteness in post-apocalyptic Atlanta.

Michonne is introduced in the last scene of Season 2. In it, the camera follows Andrea, a young white woman and one of the core group of survivors, fleeing zombies in the woods while trying to find the rest of the group that has abandoned her, thinking her already dead. Pinned down by a zombie and about to be killed, Andrea is saved by a hooded, sword-wielding figure who swiftly decapitates Andrea's attacker. This savior turns out to be Michonne, who drags behind her two black, shackled zombies that have had their arms and mouths brutally cut off. Michonne's physical prowess is established in her first action and repeated throughout subsequent scenes as she easily slices through attacking zombies, outruns and out fights most of the men in the show, and wields her katana sword with a master's skill. Comfortable with weapons and physical violence, Michonne waits for no savior and rejects dependency on men, distinguishing her from all of the other women on the show. She is coded as butch in relation to the other women charac-

ters, queering her gender presentation. Her hair is in braids, she wears no apparent makeup, and perhaps most tellingly, she walks with her head held high, physical prowess, and even a bit of a swagger—all visual signifiers that in the world of the show are only attributed to men, never women. Considering that all of the white women on the show are coded as feminine, we might be wary of the racism at work in constructing femininity itself as white and thus excluding Michonne, particularly given the U.S. history of excluding black women from femininity¹² and queer black women from queer femme communities (Bryan 147). Indeed, there are very few African American women on the show including Jacqui, a mother and wife who kills herself at the CDC; and Sasha, a member of another survivor group who eventually joins the Governor at Woodbury. However, these other black women are also quite feminine in relation to Michonne, which renders her butchness not as synonymous with black womanhood per se but rather as something that explicitly queers her in contrast to the other black and white women.

In addition to her gender presentation, Michonne is queered through her emotional and erotic attachments. After saving Andrea, the two women become close, with Michonne tending to and often risking her life to save Andrea from various illnesses and attacks as they live and travel together for several months.¹³ Throughout the first half of Season 3, while there is no sex depicted between them, their relationship is visualized through tropes associated with romantic and sexual coupledness: they are framed by the camera as physically close to one another, they touch often (particularly significant considering how rare it is for other characters to touch or be touched by Michonne), their emotional commitment is clearly to each other, they embody a vaguely butch-femme dynamic, and, perhaps most telling, Michonne becomes very jealous when Andrea's emotional and bodily attention shifts to another sexual partner. When Andrea begins a sexual relationship with the Governor of Woodbury, a terrifyingly brutal and abusive character whose violence is immediately obvious to Michonne, the women essentially experience a break-up. Citing the long-standing and offensive stereotype in lesbian cinema, literature, and cultural productions of the supposed "straight girl" who leaves the supposed "real lesbian" for a man, *The Walking Dead* renders their break up legible to audiences who have already learned to read the codes signifying their erotic and emotional entanglement. Richard Dyer explains that visual culture often relies upon iconography to signify homosexuality without having to (or being able to) explicitly depict it, using "a certain set of visual and aural signs which

immediately bespeak homosexuality and connot[ing] the qualities associated, stereotypically, with it" (Dyer 300). By employing camera angles, framing, costumes, blocking, and eye line matches that we have been trained to read as signifying sexual coupledness, indeed the same ones used in the show to represent heterosexual couples such as Lori/Rick and Maggie/Glenn, *The Walking Dead* can plausibly render Andrea and Michonne a lesbian couple and make their relationship central to the narrative without ever having to explicitly declare it. Given the obvious coding of this relationship, we might wonder after the show's coyness. However, doing so forgets the historic relationship between onscreen homosexuality and connotation,¹⁴ as well as what Danae Clark¹⁵ and Katherine Sender¹⁶ call "gay window dressing": the strategic usefulness of deploying ambiguous signifiers that can be read as gay or straight, depending upon the audience. In this way, Michonne can be queered through her removal from normative constructions of gender (femininity) and race (whiteness), thus offering a momentary critique of those ideologies, even while the show as a whole can maintain its overarching ideological investment, much in the same way T-Dog's critique functions.

Michonne's queerness is additionally marked through disability in ways that reveal the intertwining of racial, sexual, and gender norms. After being ambushed by Merle and the Governor's men, Michonne and Andrea are kidnapped and taken to Woodbury where they encounter the Governor for the first time. Michonne is immediately suspicious of the man and refuses to engage with him in any way, plotting their escape. The Governor is also immediately suspicious of Michonne, and troubled by her gender presentation, ease with weapons, and protection of Andrea. Most particularly, Michonne's refusal to answer the Governor's questions or engage with the social systems he represents, instead remaining silent and glowering. The white patriarchal town of Woodbury demands that this black, queer, butch body explain herself in its terms, and she continually refuses to engage or acknowledge these norms as valid. The show constructs Michonne as disabled in this context in much the same way people with non-normative communication strategies are assumed to be developmentally disabled, stupid, or mad. For example, stereotypes of the "mad woman," the "retard," the "stupid person of color," and the "stoic butch" who "just won't communicate" reflect this configuration, aligning all of these figures with the zombies in the show who similarly employ nonnormative communication strategies that the humans cannot or will not comprehend.¹⁷ While it may seem

surprising to read Michonne as disabled (after all, she is one of the most physically capable characters and doesn't sustain any long-term serious injuries through Season 3), disability studies reminds us that disability is constructed by culture, as it is cultural institutions that "disable" particular bodies through constructing them as "other." In this way, Michonne's blackness, queerness, communication practices, affects, and butchness are all rendered "disabilities" in the world of the show, disabilities that exceed and ultimately critique the ideologies of compulsory able-bodiness, compulsory heterosexuality, and compulsory whiteness.

Part of what frustrates the Governor about Michonne is her refusal of the gender norms, sexual practices, and racial hierarchies that the Governor and Woodbury represent, as well as her revealing of the brutal violence that undergird them. From their first introduction, Michonne reads the Governor as violent and dangerous. In contrast to the zombies, whose violence and threat to the core group of survivors is obvious to all of the characters, the Governor's threat remains hidden to all but Michonne. Unlike Andrea, she never buys into the façade of a social contract and a community based around (coerced) consent. She recognizes from the beginning the brutal and constitutive violence that undergirds Woodbury's social order, which includes torturing zombies in the name of scientific experimentation, and refuses to play along. For this, the Governor absolutely hates her. The show tries to suggest that his brutal and terrifying rage stems from specific actions of hers (such as killing his daughter, who is a zombie), but this is ultimately unconvincing as his hatred of this black, queer, butch body is more clearly tied to her very being rather than any specific actions she takes. As the show pits Michonne and the Governor against each other for the affections of Andrea, it subtly invokes sexual histories of race and disability whereby white heteronormativity is defined against and through racialized queer disability. While the show itself does not seem interested in critiquing these histories, indeed its conservative politics cause it to uphold and naturalize them, Michonne persists, fiercely attacking those who attack her and her loved ones, and refusing to allow such a system to define her desires, embodiment, or relationships.

As is clear, AMC's *The Walking Dead* offers a rich site to analyze the ways that sexuality, disability, gender, and race intertwine in contemporary zombie media. Further, it elucidates the histories of violence that stitch together global capitalism, compulsory able-bodiness, and white heterosexual patriarchy. The show raises complicated questions about these histories and offers moments of disruption that are never

entirely smoothed over by the narrative attempts at closure. A queer disability studies reading elucidates queer and resistant possibilities throughout the show, particularly regarding the intertwining of race, sexuality, and disability in zombie representations. Placing the show alongside the other zombie media examined in this book, we can also further trace the ways political, cultural, and economic systems rise again long after their supposed death. Ultimately, *The Walking Dead* demands that we reckon with the radical possibilities of non-normative bodies in all of their queer, disabled, and racialized forms. If zombie representations carry with them long histories of violence and exploitation, then critical reading practices can intervene in these histories and construct other, more heterogeneous socialities.

NOTES

1. The television show is adapted from Robert Kirkman, Tony Moore, and Charlie Adlard's comic book series of the same name. Due to space constraints, this essay focuses on the television show only. The comics contain significant differences in narrative and character development, which renders some of the details of my argument only applicable to the television show. For example, in the television show, Michonne (who I analyze extensively later in this essay) is a much queerer character than she is in the comics, and in the show the narrative information about viral transmission and the zombie virus is discovered in a different manner (and through a different character) than in the comics. Many *Walking Dead* television audiences are also fans of the comics, and analyzing how those transmedia audiences render intertextuality might make for an interesting larger project.

2. See for example Christie and Lauro; Moreman and Rushton; McAlister.

3. For more on queer disability studies, see Kaefer; McRuer; McRuer and Mollow; McRuer and Wilkerson.

4. Trans* refers to all non-cisgendered people, including transgender people, transsexuals, transvestites, genderqueers, gender non-conforming people, and others.

5. It is important to keep in mind that these marginalized groups have been historically written out of the social contract; indeed they are the bodies against which liberalism (and neoliberalism) has been defined. Through unequal suffrage laws, slavery, discrimination in housing and employment, mass criminalization and incarceration, ableist constructions of public space, colonial genocide, heterosexist and privatized health care systems, and racist immigration laws, these populations have disproportionately been denied the basic means of survival to begin with, and then are blamed in neoliberal discourse for being "drains" on the state coffer and used as justification for cutting public services. For more on these histories, see Spade.

6. In making this claim, I do not mean to equate the historical ways these populations have been and are defined, nor do I mean to reproduce the violent analogies proclaiming these populations mutually exclusive. Rather, following interdisciplinary social justice scholars I want to emphasize how these populations have been historically produced against the white, male, heterosexual, able-bodied citizen through shared discourses of medicine, law, political policy, economics, and popular culture (Cacho; Chen; Smith; Spade; Mogul, Ritchie, and Whitlock).

7. Cisgendered refers to people whose assigned gender and gender identity align; in other words, people who are not transgendered.

8. Merle incarcerates Maggie and plans to interrogate her about the rest of the group's whereabouts. The Governor tells Merle that he will take over, at which points the Governor proceeds to sexually assault her and threaten her with rape. While Merle does not directly assault Maggie in this scene, he sets up the situation, enables the Governor's actions, and defends the behavior afterwards.

9. The history of the eugenics movement is but one evocative example of this. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, the term of "feble-mindedness" functioned as a catch-all category that physicians and lawmakers attributed to lesbians, gay men, transgender people, bisexual people, sex workers, African Americans, Native Americans, people with physical and mental disabilities, unwed mothers, poor and homeless people, and immigrants to justify forcibly sterilizing them (Cacho; Wilkerson; Hall; Garland-Thomson; Ordovery; Briggs; Schweik).

10. I draw here on the work of Carrie Sandahl and other disability studies scholars who argue for "crip" as both a radical adjective and verb analogous to and intertwined with "queer." For Sandahl, "cripping spins mainstream representations or practices to reveal able-bodied assumptions and exclusionary effects. Both queering and criping expose the arbitrary delineation between normal and defective and the negative social ramifications of attempts to homogenize humanity" (37).

11. See E. Patrick Johnson; Howard.

12. See Somerville.

13. The relationship between Michonne and Andrea is significantly different between the television show and the comic series. In the show, it is the central relationship for both characters in Season 3. In the comics, the two women barely know each other and do not have any kind of intimate relationship.

14. See D. A. Miller.

15. Clark discusses gay window dressing in "Commodity Lesbianism."

16. Sender discusses gay window dressing in *Business Not Politics*.

17. For more on how communication norms have been used to construct these figures in popular culture, medicine, law, and even queer communities, see Gilbert and Gubar; Hall; Garland-Thomson; Gates; Halberstam *Female Masculinity*.

Re-Animating the Social Order

Zombies and Queer Failure

TREVOR GRIZZELL

Zombies are failures. Whether it is in the realm of reproduction, control, or life itself, zombies fail to fit into the social order in ways that make sense, and instead have a knack for bringing about the failure of society at-large. In contemporary popular culture, works like *The Walking Dead* prominently feature zombies as plot devices, with zombies infecting characters with unknown pathogens, making spaces unlivable, and creating a generalized sense of panic that serves to push the narrative forward. I do not think it is a coincidence that queer people have frequently been accused of these same actions and similarly seen as less-than-human and societal failures, with accusations of contagion and difference similarly upholding normative standards of intimacy and life. It is this articulation of queerness and the zombie that I analyze, asking how the figure of the zombie might offer new visions of queer politics. As Judith Butler questions in an analysis of violence and mourning post-9/11, "if the humanities has a future as cultural criticism, and cultural criticism has a task at the present moment, it is no doubt to return us to the human where we do not expect to find it, in its frailty and at the limits of its capacity to make sense" (*Precarious Life* 151). Along these lines, I call on a variety of contemporary and historical works in cultural theory and criticism to suggest we might find in the zombie new perspectives on failure and the human (and non-human, for that matter) that may give us a certain queer view of culture, a reconceptualization