"Gutless Bitch" Camouflage: Post-Postmodern Barbarism and Shifting Gender Performativity in AMC's The Walking Dead

Lynette Marie Surie

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"GUTLESS BITCH" CAMOUFLAGE/POST-POSTMODERN BARBARISM AND SHIFTING GENDER PERFORMATIVITY IN AMC'S THE WALKING DEAD

by

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A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of Montclair State University In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements For the Degree of Master of Arts May 2016

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ABSTRACT

*AMC’s The Walking Dead* is part of Robert Kirkman’s franchised juggernaut, *The Walking Dead.* Within this world, humans struggle to survive as they band together in groups to fight against the zombie hoard and monstrous elements of humanity. As survival is their main priority, established roles from pre-fall society no longer function as all genders, races, ages, and classes of people actively fight to live. Using Judith Butler’s gender performance theory and Julia Kristeva’s description of the abject, this thesis questions how and if gender functions when culture is destroyed and civilization breaks down. Gender markers of femininity are lost as women embrace masculinity and become stronger. There is no time for luxuries or girly things when life centers on food, water, shelter, and safety. Women can no longer function as mothers because if they do, either they or their children die. Instead, women become friends to children and others. The wild barbarity of an apocalyptic world tilts masculine and men are better prepared to survive, but women are right with them and learn quickly. In addition, women are allowed more room to function on the gender spectrum and when they are most shrewd, they can use assumptions about their gender, feminine weakness and fear, to manipulate and disarm their adversaries.

It remains to be seen if the flexibility of movement on the spectrum is lasting or if the psychological damage peeking through the storyline are the result of women taking on and preforming extreme masculinity. This thesis argues that the extremes of gender performance are damaging, death for extreme femininity and insanity for extreme masculinity, as people move towards preforming as a humanity within a more neutral presentation of gender. Feminist goals of gender equality seem possible after the destruction of the culture that perpetuates repressive femininity. Without pop culture, media, and big culture, small groups of people can find more similarity in the ability of people without the labels and stereotypes, allowing great feats of teamwork, survival, and action to occur.
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Montclair State University
Montclair, NJ
2016
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“In theory, the zombie apocalypse is the ultimate meritocracy, a do-over for humanity in which survival skills—whether they belong to men or women—top traits such as race, gender, and class [yet] stereotypes about race and gender will pop up again, even when there are no longer social structures to keep them in place.”

~ Kay Steiger

Introduction

In the 21st century, our brains are consumed by zombies. In 2003, *The Walking Dead* came to life with creator Robert Kirkman’s horror comic books. They were subsequently collected as softcover graphic novels, then larger hardcover books that became massive compendium volumes. Now several omnibus1 collectors’ editions exist. As the textual side of this enterprise runs (as of this writing, 154 published comic books deep), Kirkman franchised his product into other storytelling modes. The AMC network just finished season 6 of an award winning television remix of the books, *AMC’s The Walking Dead*, and is airing the second season of a west-coast spin-off series, *Fear the Walking Dead*. Concurrently to the AMC shows, there are four web-miniseries associated with the original *The Walking Dead*, and one, *Flight 426*, with the spin-off. Several video game developers and smartphone app developers have licensed *The Walking Dead* world on game and operating system platforms to interact with the growing fandom. Kirkman also extended the comic book story with four full-length novels, co-wrote by author Jay Bonansinga, and their audiobook counterparts are available on Audible.com the day of each novel’s release. Kirkman has since handed over the reins to Bonansinga who has produced two more novels solo2. Ten years after the comics began, a free massive open-online course (MOOC) took place on Canvas exploring issues around a zombie apocalypse, led and sponsored by AMC, Instructure, and the University of California at Irvine. The eight-week course, “Society,

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1 These are preservation-bound with 24 issues and cover-art in full-color, with a list price of $100. The variety of bindings for the comics can leave a collector quite poor.

2 As of this publication. He has incorporated Robert Kirkman’s name into the titles: *Robert Kirkman’s The Walking Dead: Decent* and *Robert Kirkman’s The Walking Dead: Invasion*. Kirkman’s built an empire.
Science, Survival: Lessons from AMC’s *The Walking Dead*, was attended by more than 65,000 people around the world (Knighton). In summary, this expansive franchise is engaging with its audience consistently and continuously across media platforms. It is immense, immersive, and imposing.

*The Walking Dead (TWD)* is a multimodal behemoth swarming the audience on all sides (print, audio, visual, textural, and visceral). The audience has only increased since AMC’s incarnation, reaching 19.5 million viewers for the premiere of season 6 (O’Connell). The audience impact potential of television has built TWD in cultural conversation and increased the layers of meaning the audience “reads” from the text. The academic field surrounding zombies and pop-culture is substantial and growing; the trial MOOC has become its own study of engagement with academia and pop-culture reach (Knighton). To date there have been at least six full-length books of criticism on zombie studies and over 40 articles in peer reviewed journals. Academics are talking about zombies and the worlds and people trying to survive them.

I have narrowed in on AMC’s *The Walking Dead (AMC’S TWD)* for this project because the television expansion of this franchise has multiplied the audience and reach in our culture on multiple levels of engagement. What was once a lowly comic book of limited reach has grown into our cultural awareness and conversations; it is exploring our culture’s fears about disease, politics, survival, humanity, famine, technological implosion, societal collapse, and more, now to

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3 Kirkman’s Production Company, Skybound LLC, have merchandized both the textual worlds and television incarnations of this franchise with corporate tie-ins and broad consumer reach. There have been several Walker/Stalker conventions held around the US in connection to the TV series, and annual zombie walks moan and groan in bloody masses of excited fans the world over at the start of each new television season. You can call into *Talking Dead* after a show and connect live with creators. You can attend survivalist classes and weekend workshops with a zombie theme. If you aren’t a fan or even if you don’t pay too much attention to pop-culture, you are not likely to evade the presence of this franchise in some form or another.

4 As cultural rhetorician James Berlin writes “Our historicist perspective on current English studies hierarchies enables us to regard all manners of discourse as worthy of investigation” (xvi). Even pop culture and primetime TV are valid of study. While a product of low-culture, the graphic novels and television shows about TWD impart and reflect contemporary social issues and ideologies that resonate and locate a culture’s attitudes, concerns, and issues.
a global audience in the tens of millions. This show about survival after all the securities and luxuries of life fall away, is drawing over 8 million viewers in the prime demographic of men between the ages of 18-49, and total viewers average 13 million, per episode (Collins). It is a masculinized world aimed at a demographic of men, but with a broad fan base of all ages. In a world of instant gratification and social media overload, this show is engaging with an audience reliant on (some may say obsessed with) their cellphones and internet feeds. Both men and women are asking each other “what would you do in the case of a zombie apocalypse?” both in person and online⁵. My friends and I have often discussed if we would survive, where we would go, what we would do, and what the world may look like in 5, 10, 20 years afterwards. Specifically, I wonder what I need to do as a woman to operate alongside and defensively against humanity if society as I know it ceases to exist. What tricks can I learn from the women in TWD? Masculinity rules the world of TWD and survival seems best suited for those who embrace it. Society grooms “men” to endure the physical demands of a survival situation; perhaps better preparing them for the harshness and danger of a zombie world, but they still struggle as no one can really be prepared for the ethical, spiritual and emotional weight. People are questioning their own abilities and making their own plans as if TWD could become real. Therefore, cultural obsession with zombies and humans in zombie worlds leads directly to this analysis, discussion and deconstruction of TWD.

Scope

Because I wonder specifically where women fit into this world, I choose to focus on gender and rhetoric within AMC’S TWD⁶. There is a clear majority of men involved in the

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⁵ This illustrates Berlin’s arguments that academics and educators should not avoid the popular because it is the popular culture engaging the people. Students and others are spending more time with the texts of popular culture than they are of academic/high culture. Berlin has compared the Shakespeare of the past, the popular theater, being a common low art for the masses, which study eventually brought into high culture. There are deep pools of cultural understanding within what some may brush off as entertainment.

⁶ The show just finished its 83⁴ episode at the culmination of Season 6.
writing, production, direction, and creative aspects of *AMC’S TWD*. Though there are a few episode-directors and a single female executive overseeing the franchise at AMC, the three show runners with the overarching vision and control have been men, as well as the majority of directors, writers, creative, and production teams. On screen, however, women in the cast do hold more space and it is interesting to see how their character arcs begin, develop, and help move plot. For all these women, the overall world of *AMC’S TWD* is inherently masculine, primitive, and dangerous. I will define and discuss femininity and masculinity in the context of our culture and show how characters move between these categories.

Between the walking undead and monstrous human equivalents, the world where humanity (dis)functions is dangerously complicated. For the women, whose roles generally began as stereotypically traditional nurturing feminine (weak, submissive, mothering, sexual), in this world, one finds dysfunction and disappointment. In the stories we are given, mothers fail to keep track of their children, and it seems mothers and children cannot coexist as such. Motherhood is a death sentence for either the children or the mothers. Men, as fathers and leaders, seem to fare better and continue to protect and raise their children; though loss is rampant in some fatherly backstories as well, their loss does not seem to alter their gender performance. I argue that there is an arc of gender-role dissolution over the course of the series within the protagonist group of survivors, a dissolution where one’s function and performance becomes about survival and life, not gender. Gender moves from unconscious application of societal expectations to calculated, manipulative, and dangerous.

**Research Questions**

Does gender matter when survival is on the line? This thesis will discuss how, where, and if the feminine fit into a masculinized apocalyptic survivalist fantasy. As examined by Palan, cultural theory sees gender exist on a continuum or spectrum of gender performance rather than a

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7 Frank Darabont season 1-mid season 2, Glen Mazzara mid-season 2-season 4, and Scott Gimple season 5-6, 7 (expected).
binary expression of gender being either masculine or feminine, though Western and mainstream culture normalizes and promotes expressions of gender as a binary system. If the culture enforcing this system falls, I argue the trappings of gender performance normativity fade as the distance from the apocalyptic event increases. How much a part of a dystopian future is gender expression and performance? Does society redefine gender norms after the fall of civilization? This performance in *AMC’s TWD* becomes rhetorical as gendered tasks fall away or people reject them.

When there is no longer a society to create the norms and standards of “civilization” are people free to be equal? This thesis will explore how gender roles shift in a move towards masculine performance. I call both extremes of masculinity and femininity into question; the most feminine women who need to make the largest shift towards the center of the spectrum, because survival seems to tilt masculine and wild when civilization is not so civil. If traditional western femininity is no longer possible or even practical, what does being a ‘woman’ in this new world mean? It seems the women in *AMC’s TWD* are putting-on masculinity in order to survive. I argue the new feminine developed in the course of survival resembles a mental androgyne if not more masculinized existence, and the reconstruction of levels of society begin to redefine gender roles. Women become genderfluid, moving between feminine and masculine performance as a tool of survival.

Does the performance of gender, or lack of identifiable gender markers, say anything about the importance of gender roles in our society? Does *TWD* indicate a lack of value for the feminine when survival is the primary focus of life? Are the traits of normative femininity valueless in a world where survival is masculine? Are people who embody obvert femininity valueless?

**Theoretical Perspective**

In addition to viewing this material from a cultural-rhetorical perspective, I also draw from two feminist areas of scholarship: Judith Butler’s gender performance theory and Julia
Kristeva’s theory of the abject. Butler’s theories, when discussing the characters, are enlightening because the absence of a stable society has displaced the reference for gender norms and constructs. Butler asserts, “Gender is the apparatus by which the production and normalization of masculine and feminine take place along with the interstitial forms of hormonal, chromosomal, psychic, and performative that gender assumes” (Gender Trouble loc. 605). Though characters attempt to continue the performance of their assumed gender roles, their survival becomes the focus and center of their lives. Butler also asserts, “[f]eminism is about the social transformation of gender relations” (Undoing loc. 2809). As the social transformation occurs in TWD, feminism looks more like an osmosis of gender as performance and women come to use markers of femininity in ways that ultimately aid their survival. Feminism is unspoken but fluidly enacted by women who survive. As I will discuss later, traditional hegemonic womanly traits like soft, warm, weak, nurturing, sexy, submissive, and motherly, are replaced by skilled, strong, cold, calculating, and deadly. There is little room for high heels or the trappings of femininity in this world—unless you need to disarm someone in denial of the new feminist world vision.

Another grounding for this thesis is the acceptance of a non-binary gender spectrum; that is, gender falls on a broad spectrum of performativity where one may conform to elements of their gender role, in whole or part, and still be considered a man or woman by society. Butler and others have generally accepted a spectrum of performance to describe the reasonable expression of gender from extreme feminine (1) to extreme masculine (12), though Butler adds that culture
performativity and allow the reader to visualize how gender expression shifts within the context of the series. As I will discuss later, the stereotypes of gender expression, as discussed by Vetterling-Braggin, are in direct correlation to cultural assumptions of gender expression. However untrue, cultural assumptions position the feminine in direct opposition to the masculine (the weaker sex, the gentler sex in opposition to the masculine as norm, not a neutral norm). In figure 1, the Barbie doll in princess represents extreme femininity gown—pink, delicate, pretty, soft, and passive. The feminine would include mothers as an ultimate expression of cultural expectations for women. While the extreme masculinity is G.I. Joe in military fatigues—camouflaged, hard, violent, strong, heroic, and active. Masculine expression may not always include fatherhood, though virility may be expected, raising children defaults to feminine duties (with discipline and financial support or provision remaining in the masculine). Make no mistake, I do not think the extremes reflect all reality for men and women, but function as icons for cultural references and supposition in the purposes of this thesis. This figure functions to illustrate American/Western gender stereotypes (at the poles), though alternative expressions of this concept may be equally valid.

As the elements of stereotypically traditional western femininity—makeup, shoes, pop culture icons—are exchanged for weapons and utilitarian survival gear, intrinsic elements of femininity are also dying. Mothers are dying. Motherhood is no longer powerful, but a drain on the group and seen as imprudent, its own horror, further hindering the group’s survival. While Butler’s theory helps establish the performativity of gender and movement within the gender spectrum, Butler does not spend much time engaged with the motherhood element of womanhood. This is not to say that all women are mothers, nor all mothers feminine, but there is a unique condition that motherhood, biologically, is rooted in the female of our species (though current scholarship may otherwise complicate the notion that via gender performance theory mothers are not always women). For application in this project, I would argue that motherhood is an element of the female experience and that cisgender women biologically perform this role in
the text. Motherhood brings with it a horror in *TWD* that needs to be met with another theory. Kristeva’s notion of the abject becomes useful on a whole when looking at the horrors of environment, as well as in the horror of abjection in mother/child relationship. Kristeva writes that the abject “does not respect borders, positions, rules” (4). Further “Abjection … is immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady: a terror that dissembles, a hatred that smiles, a passion that uses the body for barter instead of inflaming it, a debtor who sells you up, a friend who stabs you” (4). The abject is horror of and outside ourselves. It is around us and it is within us, though we may deny it. Following Kristeva’s approach, she says the child will abject the mother in order to find his own identity apart from her (13). It is a functional moment in life for the forming of human independence. In addition to one’s need for and participation in the abject, Kristeva perceives the oppositions between subject/object, self/other, Man/Woman, as solidly entrenched in our society. In “Women’s Time,” Kristeva concedes that a liberating change in the social order will never provide women a wholeness apart from patriarchal power because the “fantasy of wholeness is a function of these obstacles, not something beyond them” (Leitch 2070). Women remain abject even as they seek wholeness and power. Through Kristeva, it is possible to realize that only in the demolition of “Woman” as an identifiable social category and dissolution of the opposition between men and women, can moves be made towards synthesis of humanity. Because *AMC’S TWD* explores the destruction of society and, to some extent patriarchal normativity, it may be possible see elements of *TWD* as postfeminist and call attention to the moves which seek to recover gender roles and performance as products of repressive and regressive social systems.

As mentioned in the Introduction, the general move in this thesis to bring academic rigor to popular culture as a site of cultural value. Though I will not be addressing the pedagogical application of *AMC’S TWD*, the value of *TWD* as a site for discussion with students is clear to me the more I work with the text. There is potential for discussion on a cultural-rhetorical approach as the fandom, mainly via the internet, responds to rhetoric surrounding gender within the series. Between thorough and constantly updated wiki sites, fan fictions, and forums from Reddit to
social media, fans create more content concerning *TWD* than can ever be collected. There is even space created within an app built by AMC for fan live-streaming feedback and participation ("Story Sync"), as well as through social media; and the fan-centric show *Talking Dead*, allows viewers to react live and (perhaps) shape the narrative as producers, directors, writers, and cast participate in fan dialogue. It is widely known that show-runners have not only engaged with the fandom, but they have used fan response to characters to remix the graphic novel (comics) storyline and invent characters like Daryl and dramatically alter characters like Carol (who dies early in the comics). As a working professional in Brand and Marketing, I know there are teams of people at AMC crunching the analytics of fan engagement and the noise on the web surrounding their prized investment. One thing is certain, as *AMC*’s *TWD* unfolds over its lifetime, it is engaged with, and banking on, its audience.

**Methods**

My methods include textual analysis of *AMC*’s *TWD* and feminist rhetorical criticism in as much as I am looking at language, and silence, of and about women in the context of the series. Feminism plays heavily into my methods and informs my position. Because the breadth of this series is so extensive, and I am attempting to show a development over the course of storytelling of 83 episodes, I will explore some characters like Carol, Andrea, and Michonne in depth, while supplementing broader strokes of other characters like Lori, Maggie, and Beth. I hope the argument in my project will still hold true in future seasons, but I understand the shifting nature of the text and acknowledge the rebuilding of “civilization” and society that is taking place within this world as I am writing this thesis. In essence, I will employ a feminist rhetorical approach by way of scene and dialog analysis with an understanding that my thesis will open a discussion of these matters and the ongoing nature of the series may change any outcomes I reach here.

**Ethics**

In relation to gender roles, performance, and interaction in *AMC*’s *TWD*, I could have taken a number of approaches. Others have focused on issues of capitalism (Berk, Ehrmann,
Dolgert), psychology (Pokornoski, Boshears), race (Brooks) and gender (Brooks, Greene and Meyer, Sugg) among other equally valid and interesting approaches. In addition, I am aware that some may find my exploration of gender performance to be pushing a feminist agenda or making broad feminist claims. Such readers may not be wholly incorrect, but I hope their resistance does not overshadow the complexities of my analysis. Claims may be made that I am constructing gender issues were none exist, or perhaps I make too big of a deal out of minor gender disparity. Nevertheless, this view is a patriarchal mentality that seeks to minimize distinctions that are important to women; to see feminism as misplaced or unimportant is a primary function of misandry, a deeply rooted masculine-focused mentality.

In addition to my readers' potential apprehensions to the importance I place on certain events, this is an unorthodox application of Butler's work that is not without precedence, as I will discuss in Pye and O'Sullivan's essay. My passion for gender performance theory in her earlier *Gender Trouble* may outweigh some of her modifications in her later work, *Undoing Gender*.

While fictional and creative representations of gender in culture are full of many of the same hang-ups and concerns we have in our real lives, the activist and political work Butler has done in LGBT+ communities is the direct influence and current-purpose for her work. Using gender performance theory rooted in a specific activist community, now on fictional characters in post-apocalyptic zombieland, may seem trivial. There is a risk that the communities Butler is specifically addressing in *Undoing Gender*, the drag and trans communities, will be offended by my assertions that heteronormative and hegemonic cis-woman performance in a dystopian fiction is in any way the same as their lived experiences. I think Butler makes room for this position, and she does outline that all gender is performance and shaped in relation to the culture one faces. Whether that performance is accepted as hegemonic, or if the performer is challenging the hegemony, it is all still performative choice and read through culture. The symbolic and semiotic interrelation between women, as we understand the concept and are presented in the series, is tangled with our own culture. Different readers will likely disagree with the construction of
“feminine” and “masculine”, “man” and “woman” via the semiotic as constructed within their culture. To this end, I am writing as a white American GenX cisgender heterosexual woman. Readers may not share my assumptions and I am open to other interpretations I may not have accounted for, or had room to explore, here.

**Literature Review**

In order to understand how gender functions within *AMC’s TWD*, it is first important to better establish the theoretical concepts mentioned earlier and review the current literature focused on gender in this genre. The theorists mentioned throughout have vast and complex theories I am not attempting to synthesize fully here; moreover, this section will briefly explain some essential elements of their theories and positions in relation to how I utilize them later in this thesis. Likewise, I will summarize the literary criticism surrounding *TWD* with more attention paid to those arguments of primary importance to this project.

One of the central elements of my analysis stems from Butler’s theory of gender performance—the culturally based production of stable gender identity that obscures the real instability of the act of gender—primarily explored in her canonical *Gender Trouble*. She argues that gender is an "illusion [...] discursively maintained" by "words, acts, and gestures" (136). Later, in *Bodies That Matter*, Butler writes, "Gender norms operate by requiring the embodiment of certain ideals of femininity and masculinity, ones that are almost always related to the idealization of the heterosexual bond" (131-32). We learn how to be men and women in relation to and within heterosexual society as the norm. Butler relies primarily on scholarly work that builds on the insights of Foucault and Lacan, and develops her understanding of the perfomativeness of gender through interaction with culture, not biology, as well as behavior or performance. Sex, the biological chromosomes and presentation of one’s internal and external genitalia, and gender, "the cultural meanings that the sexed body assumes," are distinguishable from each other. Though humans come into this world with some biological sex (one that is not necessarily binary by any extent, though it is surely treated as if it is), gender is different, and "a
gender cannot be said to follow from a sex in any one way" (Gender Trouble 6). Butler explains that gendered behavior varies from culture to culture, time to time, and biological sex does not mandate these codes.

It is also of key importance to Butler that we understand how gender is "embodied"; the body, itself a cultural construction of semiotics and symbolism, is "a mere instrument or medium through which cultural meanings are expressed" (Gender Trouble 8). The culture and time create the meaning for the body, thereby giving that body gender meaning. Moreover, "[t]he practice by which gendering occurs, the embodying of norms, is a compulsory practice, a forcible production." (Bodies 231). How one behaves is policed by the cultural norms of “correct” gender expression. Gender replaces sex because the body’s meaning is created and judged against the performance within culture or society (two constructions that are uneasily interchangeable for Butler). In other words, gender is not a physical or biological given; it is enacted and performed through the body, and is imposed on the body through culture which supports a binary system and names "woman" or "girl," “man” or “boy” (Bodies 232). The material construction of woman/man in any culture begins at the site of the body and carries through to the layers of clothing, manners of behavior, and performance of activity. In addition, recognized traits of gender extend through to other senses created at the body, like sound (voice, tone, speech) and texture (soft versus hard).

In Western cultures the binary mentality of man/woman, subject/other, exists through power relations and normative expectations extending from the man as the subject and woman as Other. For Butler, citing or enacting the cultural norms of gender, masculinity or femininity, allows one to be seen as normative and belonging to an accepted form of a culture’s understanding of ‘man’ or ‘woman’ (Bodies 232). This is a central issue within AMC'S TWD because group “belonging”—or remaining an outsider—is a crucial focus of the survivors. As they seek to test the shifting boundaries of performance within their group, they are met with others (and other groups) where boundaries and performances are differently acceptable.
Members perform gender and understand power relations on three levels: societal, interpersonal, and individual. When members are confronted with non-members, there is a process to determine how aligned the non-member is, essentially seeing if they enact the group’s values and embrace the norms within the group.

In addition to Butler’s construction of gender performance, it is important in this genre to understand the power horror has on the construction of identity on these three levels as well. Like Butler, Kristeva’s theory of abjection is another post-structural concept that becomes important when looking at gender and *AMC’S TWD*. Abject is an adjective meaning horrible, degrading, vile, in a maximum degree; and abjection, the noun form describes an abject state of being. In Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror: an Essay on Abjection*, she describes the abject as that which is rejected by the subject and disturbs social order or consensus (65). It exists between the subject and object, a feeling and space of liminality and disassociation between what constitutes the self and other. Kristeva locates the primary moment of abjection between the mother and child; first, birth is the violence separating two bodies and creating two distinct people, and again with death does the child confront the corpse which “show[s] me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death” (3). In *TWD* humanity is surrounded by the abject, by death, by the walking corpses of their future selves. Their bodies contain the disease that reanimates their corpses: they are the living, walking, dead.

In seeking identity, power, subjectivity and self in this world of abjection, gender seems a lesser part of survival until the abject begins to become less of a horror and more of a social condition. The abject—the zombie plague—quite literally upsets the social order and reprioritizes the survivor’s subjectivity and identity. I argue later that this shift in priorities causes enough to upset gender dynamics, but the continual presence of the abject allows people to make real movement away from gendered stereotypes of old and for women and men to move towards a new understanding of humanity. Because the abject is a more prominent part of life, it
overwhelms survivors at first; as they learn to deal with the horror, they find themselves intrinsically changed. They come to recognize how much of a performance gender can be in relation to more important aspects of survival and society. Horror is the space between living and living, not living and dead.

Moving towards the critical conversation surrounding *AMC's TWD*, it is important to view the show within both the larger arena of zombie studies and within pop culture studies. While many critical discussions have surrounded zombies up until the 21st century, generally they have focused on the zombie as a trope in literature and in film, stemming from Haitian religious mythology (Philips). As America approached the turn of the century, interest in zombies shifted from reanimated corpse to infectious disease (Boluk and Lenz). Studies emerging post 9/11 have proliferated as zombies began to develop within literature and film (Simpson). Not only was the culture developing an interest in zombies, but the conversations around zombie literature and film was expanding. *Journal of Popular Culture* board member and college provost, Philip Simpson, argues this shift towards zombies in contemporary culture reawakened due to “global anxieties seeking adequate symbolic forms” (loc. 589). Zombies went from being horror-genre monsters to reflections of cultural anxieties because “true security is unattainable in a violent world” (loc. 608). *AMC's TWD* was the first successful television show to focus on life with zombies, and since its inception there have been 6 other television series using zombies or zombie-like beings at their core (*Helix, iZombie, Ash vs Evil Dead, In the Flesh, Fear the Walking Dead, and ZNation*).

Many journal articles have focused strictly on the comic book version (Herman 434). Of these, Kyle Bishop's chapter “Battling Monsters and Becoming Monstrous: Human Devolution in *The Walking Dead*” focuses on the dissolution of society and new morality as the fight between human and zombie becomes a fight to survive and retain a smidgen of morality. Right and wrong, good and evil, all mesh as “doing what we have to do” is enough to justify murder, execution, and all manner of human monstrosity. Humanity's best survivors border on sociopathic. Bishop
acknowledges in the footnotes of this essay that AMC’s TWD is moving in the same direction as the comics, though as the editors of two popular essay collections on TWD have noted (Yuen 2016, Keetley 2014), the differences between these two texts do not always lead to the same understanding. The divergences between the books and comics are not interchangeable in all cases, and critics looking at this franchise usually focus on either the books or the show. Though there are some which usefully acknowledge the changes, such as Castro and Beisecker’s and Scarlet’s analyses of the gender-swap from the book to the show of brothers Ben and Billy with sisters Lizzie and Mika (and the deaths of Ben by Carl and Lizzie by Carol), their reasoned arguments do not necessarily further my goals here. Still, other critics like Bishop, who focus on the books, are more useful because they are aware of the moments of connection and shared themes between the books and TV show and do not assume they are interchangeable texts. Bishop is the most broadly published in the field of Zombie Studies and must be included. I have specifically set aside those critics who loosely argue between the two incarnations as exchangeable parts of some whole and not rhetorically divergent in important ways. Exploring further nuances between the rhetoric in the comic collection, novels, games, and television shows (alongside the wealth of online fan-created material), would only serve to confuse the reader, though certainly the divergences, remixes, and connections amongst these media is certainly ripe for study elsewhere.

There are several essay collections solely focused on AMC’s TWD (Keetley, Lowder, Yuen 2012 & 2016, and Olmstead). The scholarship within ranges from discussions of the actual zombies (Nurse, Kremmel, Bishop) to the humans left behind (Keetley, Farnell, Barkman, Round, Pye and O’Sullivan, Sheppard). Out of these, issues surrounding gender and humanity are divisive. Ashley Barkman’s “Women in a Zombie Apocalypse” and Danyee Pye and Peter

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8 The swaps between the books and the series are numerous. Usually moving along gender lines, men replaced by TV women, there are race and age modifications and enhancements that build to make the TV series one of the most diverse, well-rounded, casts today (Deggans).
O’Sullivan’s “Dead Man’s Party” in Yuen’s collection, The Walking Dead and Philosophy: Zombie Apocalypse Now (2012), both deal with the assumption of sexual dimorphism – the idea that men are naturally stronger than women – at play in the series (113). Here, commonalities end.

Essentially these two articles are at odds because they position gender as biologically determined (Barkman) or socially constructed (Pye and O’Sullivan). Pye and O’Sullivan name and challenge the assumption of sexual dimorphism upon which Barkman builds her arguments.

It is helpful that Barkman acknowledges that masculinity and femininity exist on a continuum, but analysis of masculinity and femininity dissolve into stereotypical and tired assumptions: boys tend to be more competitive, are tougher, are more physical, and girls are more emotional, caring, and collaborative (97-98). Her driving questions—is feminism [after the zombie apocalypse] relevant? Are men and women equal? Should they share in the same duties?—call out the more stereotypical actions of men and women on the show and use these moments as a basis of proof that these stereotypes of masculinity and femininity are valid and hold true, thereby establishing “masculinity has qualities that lend itself to leadership whereas femininity lends itself to being led (99). Pye and O’Sullivan are not as quick to establish stereotyping as proof, and instead acknowledge “gender is a social construct, that it can be constructed differently, and that clinging to outmoded ideas of gender roles […] increase the likelihood of [survivors] falling prey” to walkers (107). Survival is dependent on shifting social and interpersonal relationships and identities (all must perform ‘survivor’ regardless of gender, sex, age, race, ability, etc.). Pye and O’Sullivan begin at the same place as Butler—gender is socially constructed—whereas Barkman dismisses social construction theory and theorists, favoring biological determinism (sex=gender).

The biological arguments Barkman makes clearly are at odds with Butler’s theories because Barkman is quick to dismiss feminists and cultural critics who locate gender apart from sexuality and biology. She uses the controversial research of physician and psychologist Leonard Sax, whose book Why Gender Matters: What Parents and Teachers Need to Know About the
Emerging Science of Sex Differences (2005), has been praised by some for his insights on gender difference and lambasted by others for its use of outdated and outright false research (Liberman). Sax falls in line with sex-difference psychologists and theorists who claim men and women possess different psychological traits as inherent to their biological sex. A sex-difference theorist may describe a person as "feminine" if they have traits like: gentleness, modesty, humility, supportiveness, empathy, compassionateness, tenderness, nurturance, intuitiveness, sensitivity, unselfishness (Vetterling-Braggin 5). The same theorist might classify a person as "masculine" if they have traits like: strength of will, ambition, courage, independence, assertiveness, aggressiveness, hardness, rationality or the ability to think logically, abstractly and analytically, ability to control emotion (Vetterling-Braggin 6). The sex-difference theorist uses scientific research while often ignoring or downplaying sociological and psychological research (Vetterling-Braggin 28). Work in the social sciences has shown gender is more complicated and the sum of all these traits are humanity, as Mary Ann Warren argues (qtd. in Vetterling-Braggin 83). This thesis aligns with the perception that all these traits are expressed on the spectrum of human experience, a position that lends itself to both gender spectrum theory and culture-based gender theories.

Sex-difference based arguments assume a patriarchal and antagonistically heterocentric view of gender. It creates a view of the feminine stereotype as weaker, dependent, and second to the masculine. As Sarah Lucia Hoagland explains:

The feminine stereotype provides a basis for the ideology of special protection for women, thus enforcing heterosexuality. For men to maintain the conceptual framework in which they can see themselves as protectors, they must establish and maintain an atmosphere in which women are in danger; they must create our victim (feminine) status. To maintain the ideology of special protection of women, men have portrayed us as helpless, defenseless, innocent – victims, and thereby, targets to be attacked. If we act in
self-defense and thus step out of the feminine role, becoming on their terms active and "guilty," men step up overt physical violence against us to reaffirm our victim status. (94)

Male is primary and female is modified against that center as lesser, weaker, and other. This has been proven to be a problematic, though normative, perception of stereotypical femininity (Hoagland 94). In _TWD_, everyone is in danger at the start. Both men and women are surviving in a dystopian reality where patriarchal norms are failing. Women stepping up to avoid being targets is part of survival and they are not punished, instead they are doing a service for the group. As season 6 begins to explore, when norms are reestablished, this step out of the feminine role carries with it violence and moral weight. I will discuss this challenge later in this thesis.

If we shift away from the man-as-center position, it would follow that the view of gender identity would also have to shift. Perhaps the basis of stereotypes listed in sex-difference theory can serve us as markers of extreme femininity and extreme masculinity; sex-based theory contains elements of cultural assumptions that make gender stereotypes seem natural. Because culture is at the base, it is logical to find Pye and O'Sullivan's views in Butler's gender performance theory, in direct opposition to Barkman and more advantageous for inquiry. Though they apply gender performance theory to a "genderless enemy," the zombie, and they do not expand their discussion to the performance of gender in the survivors, their connection to Butler is thoughtful and allied. A culture-based analysis can bridge the gap between the assumptions rooted in scientific sex-based difference theory and philosophical theories such as gender performance.

Pye and O’Sullivan call attention to the shortsighted vision of the early show runner, Frank Darabont, in his making “unimaginative performance of gender” the fallback position (114). The regression of the survivors into stereotypic gender roles are both a ploy in the storytelling, one which simplifies more complex relationships and roles in the comic books for a television audience, and a tool to highlight the struggle to reclaim “normal” in a world crawling with undead. They aren’t satisfied with the simplistic division of labor between genders and, in
what four seasons further looks to be a predictive move, state “if success requires a unified humanity, it calls for the erasure of all human divisions. This holds especially true for gender divisions” (115). Essentially, as I will discuss later in this paper, in the succeeding seasons, the protagonist group of survivors operates without gendered division of labor and a performance of humanity trumps gender performance. Survivors come to use gender as a tool to neutralize threats, though women have real success with this.

If Pye and O’Sullivan call for the erasure of gender divisions and a shared power-structure as key to the success of survivors, Barkman argues equality and shared power are “luxuries” that are not practical during crisis (103). She argues that feminism will fail and is failing when survival is on the line, and natural leaders—men—should take charge. The “naturalness” basis established is central to the assumptions Barkman uses to further her position that survivors have no time for feminism or equality. This position is frustrating to read as a feminist, but elements of this theme are present in some other essays. Simpson explores the Hobbesian concept of “strongman leaders” who have “no choice but to compete for dominance over a loosely allied group of passive survivors” (loc. 713). He refers back to Barkman as establishing that gender roles are “strictly and conventionally delineated” along lines with few, if any, shows of female empowerment (loc. 719). He does not question the syllogism Barkman establishes in her essay; instead, he uses her assumptive logic to strengthen his own position. Because I find fault in both the means and ways Barkman constructs her argument, I find Simpson’s machismo strongman figure another generalization. This trope, the man-on-man struggle for power and control, is surely present, but I offer that sometimes there is a female figure who complicates the picture, and both Simpson and Barkman write away the complication.

Writing at the end of season two, Pye and O’Sullivan leave room for the future as survivors “leave cultural baggage behind” (107). If genderless zombies trouble the idea of gender because they bear little marker of culture and gender and, decomposing, continue to leave these markers behind, the survivors are also moving farther away from the markers of culture that
supported and maintained a feminine gender performance rooted in vanity and cosmetics. Zombies all “do” the same thing and want to eat your face off; looks, culture, emotions, life itself no longer matters to zombies. Survivors begin to act more and more alike as well because it is all about surviving as humans—if they can survive with any humanity left. Pye and O’Sullivan see the first moment when Rick confronts and kills his first zombie, the little girl in the gas station, the defining moment when the living and dead confront their performative actions. I will discuss this moment at length in the next section, but for Pye and O’Sullivan, Rick performs protector/Sheriff/Man/Father/Law, and she performs zombie (with teddy bear). Rick’s layers do not fall away readily, but for women, I argue they pick up new expressions of womanhood and drop old layers as they show more depth because the expectations of “performing woman” fall away as the series progresses. Women generally have a broader expression of acceptable gender and it only gets wider as they embrace expressions that are even more masculine.

The threads of scholarship concerning AMC’S TWD and gender, especially Pye and O’Sullivan, are important to further with the work of this thesis. As I do not agree with Barkman, and have pointed to issues central to her position, it is troubling that others like Simpson and Roth and Shoults, who lean towards cultural theory but have cited Barkman’s work and use her sex-difference based assumptions to further their own arguments, utilize Barkman short of questioning her source. More shocking is the implication from Roth and Shoults that Barkman’s argument is a feminist critique because she questions the validity of feminism in TWD (225). They do, however, come to see some flawed logic in her assumption of sex-based difference.

It is easy to make a sex-difference based argument because the stereotypes are rooted in our media, entertainment, and popular culture, so it seems reasonable many would not question Barkman’s research. Though Pye and O’Sullivan’s work is rooted in cultural theory and lays some foundation with Butler, turning to the people and not the zombies highlights an unexplored avenue. Pye and O’Sullivan do not further these same stereotypes or assumptions because there is
an inherent difference that is not sex-difference, but of the culture of \textit{TWD}, heartbeat difference—either you have one or you don’t. Living humanity of all genders is on the same side.

Gender in a world post-zombie outbreak (PZO), just as in our own lives, is tied to the society members operate within. Analyzing the shift in gender performance in this text, from right after the outbreak through several years past, the audience witnesses just how much gender becomes a construction and performance. Can this possibly lead us to wonder about the fluidity of our own gender performance? Can we use gender like a tool? Berlin may agree with me that the heights of \textit{TWD} in cultural conversation and the breadth of this 24/7/365 franchise clearly hold weight in our cultural conversation.

\textbf{Welcome to burgeoning gender equality.}

I have established in the previous section the divide between sex-based theory and cultural theory, and it is important to recognize how sex-difference based assumptions are established as the series begins. In the first episode, we get a taste of gender normativity before the rise of the dead. The first words on \textit{AMC}'s \textit{TWD} are spoken by Rick when he arrives at an abandoned gas station and sees the shuffling, bunny-footed slippers of a young girl. He calls “Little Girl? Little Girl? I'm a policeman. Little girl. Don't be afraid. Little girl.” Rick is shocked when she turns to face him because she is obviously undead, no longer a lost little girl to save. Rick processes this with regret and fearful acceptance. Her snarling progression towards him triggers Rick to draw his weapon and shoot her in the head. Rick is aware that the dead are somehow walking and looking to eat the living because this scene takes place in the timeline a few days after he wakes from his coma, yet his first instinct when alone at the gas station carries over from the society that he remembers – little girls need help and protection from police and

\footnote{For ease of understanding, seasons and episodes throughout this thesis are listed for reference by Season#: Episode#, and in some cases time signatures from Netflix versions of the series. Thus, this scene is “Days Gone By” - S1:E1, 3:33.}
men\textsuperscript{10}. I consider this first act by Rick a death to old assumptions as the audience also shares his growing understanding of his place in this undead world. Over the course of the series, his sense of duty rises and falls as he begins to see that the “rules” of, and roles within, the fallen society are inadequate for the constant survival situation of his group. In fact, as this opening scene shows, little girls may be the danger policemen need to kill. Furthermore, this dead little girl establishes a running theme of the desire to protect “little girls” well into season 4, though the repetitive (global) failure to do so throughout the course of the series I will discuss later in this thesis.

Before zombies, the world is just as patriarchal as our own. Episode 1 establishes this attitude men have of women pre-fall. In the second scene, a flashback to pre-zombie life, Sheriff’s Deputy Rick, and his partner Shane, discuss men and women in their police vehicle. Shane sets up a flippant narrative with a question “What’s the difference between men and women?” He then goes on to joke about women as “chick[s]” and “pair[s] of boobs” in an anecdote about how women are “too stupid to turn off a light switch” while Rick chuckles. Both men are demeaning; Shane quotes the “guy bible” that says women are dumb and need training, but you need to be “polite” to them or they won’t sleep with you; for Rick (speaking of his wife, Lori), women can be impatient and verbally cruel. Shane condescendingly questions if Rick shares his feelings and “that kind of stuff”\textsuperscript{11} when Rick confesses that Lori wants him to “speak” more. The tone of the conversation changes from the levity Shane attempted to a more serious admission:

Rick: The last thing she said to me this morning, “Sometimes I wonder if you even care about us at all.” She said that in front of our kid. Imagine going to school with that in your head. The difference between men and women? I would never say

\textsuperscript{10} It is interesting to note that he says “policeman” not the PC “police officer”. I think this is telling of the both Rick’s sense of duty as a sheriff deputy and man, as protector and father.

\textsuperscript{11} Boehm loc. 2619
something that cruel to her...and certainly not in front of Carl.\textsuperscript{12}

This admission establishes the tenor of Rick’s family unit. He and his wife are arguing openly at home in front of their son. He, as father and man, would not demean her motherhood in this way. Her comment wounds his masculinity and throws his role of father/protector/husband/provider into question in front of his son, the next generation looking to him to learn “man”. The masculinity narrative fathers pass down to their sons is that men are tough, strong, providers, defenders, action-oriented stoics (Kistler and San Juan 42-43). Rick’s focus is on protecting his son from harsh words of his mother that wound his masculinity. He calls her cruel for speaking up about her feelings, and he believes he shows his love through actions, not words. Kistler and San Juan would say Rick suffers alexithymia, or inability to identify or describe emotion; this is an element of the masculine narrative because in patriarchal societies men are not encouraged or allowed to develop the language or capacity to describe what they do feel (44-45). We will see this move from action (the world of men) to speaking (the world of women) replay repeatedly over the series with those that speak—about feelings, intentions, and conflict-resolution—losing. Women like Carol and Michonne suffer their own kind of alexithymia, because they do not have the language to describe what the killing, the horror, the loss, and the stoicism has actually done to their emotional health.

The unseen space between the prior world and the PZO-world leaves the viewer unsettled, as the cop-banter in \textit{TWD} world before the event feels very much like our current culture and time.\textsuperscript{13} The viewer accepts the realism of this world because it seems not only plausible but also familiar. The heteronormative gender dichotomy is subsequently replicated and explored throughout \textit{AMC’S TWD} season 1 and continues through season 2, leading to the earliest

\textsuperscript{12} “Days Gone By” - S1:E1, 8:21.
\textsuperscript{13} Minus the knowledge of the zombie. The walking undead are spoken of as walkers, biters, things, bastards, geeks, rotters, deados, etc. but never “zombie.” The realism of this world counts on the absence of any undead lore, so the characters are caught off-guard and unprepared to deal with the horror of the dead rising.
critics’ limited views on the reconstruction of the post-apocalyptic society\textsuperscript{14}. The men have
dangerous jobs (cops) and their girlfriends are dumb but sexy, and wives are harpies who
emasculate them in front of their sons. As a baseline, the first ten minutes of this series creates a
connection with tropes we are all too familiar with in our own culture: buddy cops, car chase, and
police office shot in the line of duty. We do not get women in their own words or by their own
presentation. It is through the impressions of men, a male gaze, that the audience comes to know
women—and this extends through the first season—so if it is only through the outside that
women are presented, it is not unfair to assume the stereotypical gender roles and assumptions of
womanhood and femininity fall into line with normative gender performance in a patriarchal
society. Cracks in this male gaze happen at times, when we see women coming to a scene on their
own terms without a man’s preface, but this is not a real part of the show until later seasons.

Women deferring to men, and men defaulting to power positions, simply fails for the
group. The stress of the new situation pushes people to grasp stereotypes as the only knowledge
that is comfortable. When Lori finally enters the screen, it is in relation to the man, Shane, as
protector and leader—her new beau is Rick’s former partner in part because Shane leads her to
believe Rick dead and gone. Shane, the beta, is now the alpha. He is a leader of a small group of
survivors in an abandoned quarry. When Amy, another survivor, hears a voice (Rick) come over
the radio she clearly communicates back with excitement, but Rick does not hear her message.
Dale, an older man who functions for a time as a moral compass, pops up and tells/yells at Amy
to get the voice back, yet before she can try, Dale addresses Shane “Come on, Son, you know best
how to work this thing.”\textsuperscript{15} Shane snatches it from her hands because, apparently, CB radios are
beyond a woman’s skills. Immediately afterward, Lori’s optimism about the radio broadcast is

\textsuperscript{14} All the published material prior to 2013 holds this same limited view of characters because the show
seemed to be heading in one direction, perhaps similar to the comics. Yuen’s 2016 \textit{The Walking Dead
and Philosophy: Hungry for More}, addresses some of turns made after season 3, especially the
development and reconceptualization of Carol’s character and addition of Daryl Dixon to the mix.
\textsuperscript{15} “Days Gone By” - S1:E1, 51:03
shot-down; the men, (both Dale and Shane), belittle both her and Amy’s plan to put signs up on
the roads to warn travelers (specifically the unknown radio voice) that the dead have overrun
Atlanta. Shane insists time is a luxury they do not have and day-to-day survival of their group is
the only concern. His word is the only word. The dynamic assumes men have control of the
group’s belongings (cars) and knowledge (how the radio works). The women appear to have
plans but no means or support to enact them\textsuperscript{16}. Subsequently, actions by men enact silences on
women, and the women comply. The action-oriented man and the passive woman is at play in
the group dynamic. The scene closes with Lori and Shane in a couples’ fight: he dominates, she
submits, and Shane takes a silencing kiss from a willing Lori. I argue that instead of “natural”
sexual dimorphism, the foundation of these traditional gender roles becomes a default because of
the newness of the survival situation. The reality that no one really knows what is going on or
how to deal with the reanimation of the dead is hidden behind a patriarchal take-charge mentality.
Even if the world before zombies was not as rigorously delimited on stereotypical gender lines,
the addition of the unknown abject has pushed these women right into performed femininity.

With this mentality, Lori and Carol are defined as moms to their children and they and
the other women tend to wash and cooking (home and hearth) while the men see to security,
defense, and hunting. They are performing extremes of what they know to be their gender roles
because of the imminent threat of interminable undead. The only foil to this is Andrea, who fights
this gendered work dichotomy and is perceived to be both a bitch and a troublemaker by the men,
and lazy by the women. She is a voice of second-wave feminism that sees the gender work-split
and voices the obvious. The women, who are actively laundering clothes, look to her with
disdain. No one thinks the men on guard are lazy though they find time to sun themselves and,
like Shane, play at catching frogs with the kids. It is as if women are finding comfort in routine

\textsuperscript{16} The women do not think to work together. Later, Lori decides to take the car and find Rick only to
-crash into a walker, flip the vehicle, and require saving. The first two seasons were seriously setting up
Barkman’s argument for her!
passivity.

The washing women scene is the moment where the characters confront the stereotypes as they continue to participate in them. Ed, Carol’s abusive husband, drinks beer in the background as he watches the women work. Shane and Carl splash about the foreground. Andrea’s identification of sexism and admission of her longing for her vibrator leads to Ed labeling her a “smart-mouth uppity bitch.” As if violence is his only language, Shane beats Ed severely in a show of machismo. Stereotypes act like monotone pockets into which characters sit, waiting to be killed-off, or they overflow beyond, challenging and complicating their roles. Carol quietly seconds Andrea’s vibrator comment, a sign that though repressed into this meek and dutiful wife by a controlling husband, there is more of her to come. After Ed’s death-by-walker, and Carol’s cathartic destruction of his corpse, Shane underestimates her at the CDC, when the group is looking to exit the locked-tight and ready to self-destruct facility and Shane says “I don’t think a nail file’s gonna do it.” Carol, instead, pulls a grenade out of her pocket. No other women have weapons on them that can save the group but Carol. The six episodes of season 1 establish, via stereotyped characters and gender role performance, a baseline for movement towards alternate gender performance realities, and Carol’s forethought to save a grenade shows a shift in power as she, now free from her husband, saves the group for the first time.

This group of transient survivors becomes the embodiment of the shifting gender norms and performance on the show into season 2. The sophomore year of the series is a full-run of 13 episodes, 12 of which transpire at the Greene home and family farm. The interaction of Rick’s roving survivors and Hershel Greene’s farm/home-bound enclave of survivors highlights subtle changes in gender performance. There is still a gender polarity, where women make time in the kitchen and in the home and men wield the weapons outside the home. The men strip Andrea of her gun—one given to her by her father—due to the men’s perception of her mental instability.

17 “TS-19” - S1:E6
following her near suicidal act at the CDC, but she fights back against them to reclaim her power and takes position as a group protector outside the home. This is not without some unrest among women like Lori, who find comfort in having a home to work within again. Andrea’s largest contention is that the men make these decisions for the women’s safety and sanity, but no one is doing any checks the mental stability of the men and removing their weapons. The Greene group has been functioning within a bubble the whole while, with men hunting and women running the home. It becomes clear, over a few episodes, that the mental instability of their own men—who are collecting and storing zombies in the barn because they think zombies are “just ill” people—is not only unquestioned by the Greene women, but is supported as they “feed” the zombies like carnivore livestock. So much is wrong with the business as usual approach, but their group does not have a challenging voice.

The small nugget of feminist voice in Andrea, in the first two seasons, performs an “everyman” role which calls attention to how strange “business as usual” is in the interrelation of characters. However, that small feminist voice is also without place in this world. Barkman asserts “The zombie apocalypse opens our eyes to what feminists misconceive as a “gruesome” reality: men and women are not only different, they are not equals, and being equals is not the be-all and end-all of life—getting away from the flesh-eating undead, preferably with the ones you love, is. Political correctness shouldn’t rear its haughty head in life-or-death situations” (loc. 2059). Andrea is voicing a gruesome reality amongst an even more gruesome reality: the dead want to feed on the living without prejudice. No one, especially not Andrea, is looking for a leadership role because she believes women can do more than laundry. While Barkman is limited in scope, focusing on the divisions of labor, women cooking and laundering, this does not save them in the end. It is perhaps true that feminism, as Barkman explains, does not fit into this world, but it is not calling for equal pay or equal rights; it is one woman calling for her right to

18 Pye and O'Sullivan loc. 2183
19 Steiger, “No Clean Slate” loc. 1780
help protect the group. It is a woman standing up for herself and identifying that her safety is more vital than her laundry, no matter what others think. Is it politically correct to want to survive and entrust your survival to your own hands, not someone else’s? Barkman is too quick to hand men this power. Men foolhardily conclude their decisions are the “right” decisions, but they get people killed. They get many people killed. Becoming self-assured and reliant is part of life for all. Neither gender is being logical, sane, or secure except for this lone woman; everyone else, regardless of gender, is continuously making bad decisions, believing that sticking to what is comfortable is best.

Women being women and men being men, is so far from the solution. If each gender preforms in only one sphere (women in the house, cooking, cleaning, and mothering and men in the wild, hunting, protecting, and planning) neither gender is performing wholly to survive. If women would better protect themselves, performing the masculine duties relegated to the men, the men would spend less time trying to protect the women and perhaps better protect themselves. Lori and Carol’s cowering under a car in sick fear do not save their children, under a neighboring car, from being nearly eaten by an undead herd of zombies. When her daughter runs from the herd, Carol spends the better part of six episodes weeping at the men in a manipulative manner and hoping someone else (a man) will find her daughter (who was undead in Hershel’s barn the whole while). Playing out traditional gender roles is only getting the group killed. Men go out from the home on missions and women wait for them, with the exception of Maggie (Greene) who leads Glenn on missions to get supplies together. They survive without injury. Teamwork and equal risks on all parts equate to survival.

*TWD* does offer hints of gender progression and strength inherent in women like Maggie, the twenty-something Greene, who shows, more than vocalizes, a gender performance that is

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20 For instance, Hershel’s decision to keep a barn full of undead because they are “sick” and may be revived; Shane’s sexual-assault on Lori when he is rejected; Rick’s decision to kill the Saviors; Father Gabriel’s decision to lock his church doors so his entire congregation gets eaten by walkers—these decisions are only some that show men are also incapable of protecting their communities.
closer to masculine than the other women held up on the farm. She is also challenging the feminine stereotype because she is not a motherly woman nor expressive feminist. She goes out on her own, both before the apocalypse to college and afterwards to find and warn members of Rick’s group. She owns her sexuality and comes on to Glenn. She does not look to her father to approve their relationship nor her sexual proclivities. She does what needs to be done without announcing the politics of her actions. Survival may know no gender, though the patriarchal society before the zombies has better prepared men to action and women to support, through Maggie, we can see that action and going out into the wild without relying on men, is the way of the future. Relying on “natural order” shrinks the group in violent ways, and they need new ways of thinking about the world around them and new ways of performing in it.

Extraneous action—that which does not aid in the survival of self or group—becomes selfish. Whether it is Daryl risking his life looking for a lost child, or Beth, the youngest Greene sister, going into a catatonic state, weakness is reliance on others to survive. Unfortunately, it is in performing femininity where extraneous action, weakness, and reliance shows most often in these early seasons. Again, Andrea is the voice of reason, calling out Lori’s self-righteous attitude and Beth’s cry for attention as markers of the failures of femininity. The lone feminist calls attention to how performing femininity, as a stereotypical weakness, is in fact a failure to realize and engage with reality in a way that supports survival. All the niceties of civilization, the family dinner table and prayer before meals, the soap-opera drama that is Shane/Lori/Rick is all-extraneous and not survival. If Andrea, instead, took more action instead of talking about it, she may not have fallen into the comfort and false sanctuary of Woodbury and the patriarchal madness of the Governor, in season 3.

A radical upheaval from the safety of the home and hearth to a wild search for a semblance of wellbeing, transplants the nucleus of the womanly domain onto a more masculine-

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21 “Trigger Finger” - S2:E9
22 “18 Miles Out” - S2:E10, 8:00
driven, survival-of-the-fittest, one—the wild. The whole group is moving into the sphere of the man, leaving women without a central component that defines the traditional feminine—the home. In the early seasons, women give into the men’s needs to plan, execute, and secure the camps and missions for food. They are trusting men for leadership and guidance. With men hunting and securing, the women do domestic chores: laundry, cooking, gathering mushrooms, cutting hair, educating the children, worrying, and essentially playing house. Steiger notes the “strange” domesticity early in the series, specifically in the comics: when survival is the main goal, why is the quarry camp reeking of family camping summer vacation (loc. 1735)?

Movement away from the home, the domain of domesticated femininity and stereotypical womanhood, is a move all are making at the end of season 2. They take to the road as a zombie herd overtakes the farm. It is violent and bloody with multiple deaths. It would be unfair to fault Barkman for her argument because she does not have the hindsight to recognize other actions, like Carol’s grenade as forward thinking, Andrea’s exposure of the inequality of old ways of thinking, or Maggie’s strength and self-assurance, as successful elements of a burgeoning shift in gender performance. She highlights elements that rigidly conform to stereotypical gender roles and cannot foreshadow the changes in gender performance (and director and writing team) that four additional seasons bring. Barkman is not privy to the extreme madness of a power-hungry, uber-masculine, Governor, the hulking masculinity of Tyreese, which shifts into gentle and tender mothering for baby Judith, the murderous mental illness of tween Lizzie, or strong-willed and heroic Maggie, nor is she (or any comics-centered critic) prepared for how much of a badass Carol becomes. Still, to assert that things work out better with men performing their manly duties, ignores that, in reality, no one is safe in these two seasons regardless of performing their gender roles traditionally. The group shrinks by one-third at least at the end of both season 1, and again,

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23 However, the comics has far progressed the series at the point of Barkman’s analysis. There is no reason to assume the show she comments on would follow the comic series as the differences between the two forms are vast. The change of directors after season 2 seems a direct response to the poor stereotypical gender and race decisions made by the team lead by the original director (Olmstead).
season 2. In the very last moments enters a shrouded woman on her own terms, Michonne, wielding a katana and saving a fallen Andrea, a signal that a change is happening for women. Women can save women.

**No home, no hearth: Shifting into the masculine**

After the farm and into seasons 3 and 4, women change. They become free of the home that rooted a woman’s place and adopt clothing that is more masculine, behavior, and temperament as a way to survive. They are moving in literal silence as a group, into and out of abandoned homes in search of respite. They are not making homes, and gone are the days of washerwomen and all-male patrols. In the new survival social order, to be feminine has become a violation; “[w]hen gender norms operate as violations, they function as an interpellation that one refuses only by agreeing to pay the consequences: losing one's job, home, the prospects for desire, or for life” (Butler, *Undoing* loc. 2946). The soft, traditional feminine is a violation in *AMC's TWD*, and since all costs are already paid, no home, job, or security are left. Women become not only free to reject the expectations of the norm, but also to perform/create a new norm. The construction of the social environment shifts from what was once, to what is now, a “now” that is hardly stagnant, safe, or stable. In *TWD*, the members of a society that forcibly transcend yesterday’s norms into a roving post-postmodern barbarity construct this “now”. Moral compasses reset far from the norms of before as violence, and perhaps the masculine domain of the wild, becomes part of life.

What at first appears a sexist and unforgiving environment for women, established from the first conversation between Rick and Shane in season 1, morphs into a more balanced and equal fight for survival; however, equality is not without cost. Mothers who have lost their children, Carol and Michonne, approach survival with a cold and calculated persistence, keeping some distance from children and relationships. Carol begins to navigate this newfound strength with a cold edge; Michonne’s (previous) motherhood and journey into the warrior-woman she becomes, happens outside the narrative, and later we see her tentative return to trusting some of
the society she shunned. She arrives already devoid of the trappings of the former society, cloaked (literally) in strength and mystery, but we come to realize that her stoicism was a reaction to great personal loss. As part of the group, she works to befriend Carl after his mother’s death but remains no more than a friend to him and others. Friendship is a recurring theme, as it is friends, equals, who choose to remain together.

Fundamentally, the performance and resignification of gender, for women, becomes necessary for survival of the individual and group. Cross-gender education on the tools for survival, from hunting to protection, and both physical and emotional distance, and later reliance, on members of all gender incarnations, is part of survival. If anything, AMC’S TWD shows that women and men form functional friendships that mutually benefit one another instead of depending on the other for assumptions of previous gender stereotypes. Aside from fleeting sexual undertones²⁴, the plotline post season 3 centers on the interpersonal relationships between men and women as equal humans without limited, (pre)scribed gender roles. As the group sets up “home” in a prison, all members take watch, all members guard the fences, all members do equal labor for the good of the group. They begin to see the horrors of the undead as problems to overcome, and they seek to work as a mixed-gender unit to ‘clear’ areas. The group begins to meet the horror around them not with assumptions, but with unified and tactical form.

Horror, the abject, becomes deeply rooted in their lives as normal. They are no longer hiding behind the walls of a home, the fences on a farm, or the false security of civility. They must embrace the abject nature of the world in order to move beyond their prescriptive stereotypes and assumptions. The abject “does not respect borders, positions, rules” (Kristeva 4). Civilization has come unbound because borders are destroyed, both figuratively and literally. The world is disparate and disconnected, pop culture is dead alongside paths of communication; without means of communication, individual bands of people form and dissolve without much

²⁴ Maggie/Glenn romance S2 onward, Sasha/Bob flirtation S5, Abraham/Rosita S5 and Abraham/Sasha S6, Rick/Michonne relationship S6
notice and rules vary by group. The only commonality amongst all is the abject, which becomes so normal that it is sometimes ignored. ‘Home’ is the horror that binds us. While the unnaturalness of the walking undead is a daily reminder of their own decomposition and deaths, to begin to accept and not fear this abject is part of embracing this shift towards a new normal. All parties see the constant and daily abject with an (almost) indifference.

It is one thing that the undead abject becomes part of their normal, but that human and living abjection must also be integrated into their lives—killing the living to save themselves—I believe adds to the dissolution of the gender binary. Kristeva argues that birth—new life—is the ultimate moment when the child becomes abject from the mother, in order to find his own identity apart from her (13). It is a doubly complicated abjection for the child to kill the mother. Carl offers his mother, Lori, a bullet-through-the-brain, after the mortally traumatic birth of his sister. Death surrounds this child (Carl) and is of his sister (Judith) but it is with little pretense that this horror is necessary. Maggie tears the girl from Lori’s womb before Carl ends his mother’s (after)life. Just as Carol lost her child in season 2, and Michonne at some point before she is introduced, mothers cannot mother their children in this post-apocalyptic world because there is no room for the weight or security of that relationship. Motherhood is abject.

Maggie becomes a symbol for how women, who are already powerful, develop. Her sexual agency, her physical power, and her survival instinct—apart from the hearth, she finds even more agency and can look to actively create her life and continue making choices. The mother-child relationship of the old society was far too close, the child as living extension of her own womb, and this new world needs to create the distance between mother and child and reestablish one between father, or man, and child. Maggie can be a friend, not surrogate mother,

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25 In the last episode of season 6, “Last Day on Earth”, Maggie appears to be having a miscarriage. She very much wanted to have a child and fight for something in this new world by reclaiming motherhood. Because of the timeliness of this project, I cannot predict the outcome for her or her child. In the comic series, her husband Glenn meets his death at the hands of Negan, the very cliffhanger left open until season 7. It will be interesting to see if the removal of the father in a child’s life is the reclamation of motherhood, or if she will lose the child to miscarriage, further solidifying my claims here.
to the baby Judith, but childcare is never shown as her primary or even secondary concern. Instead, at that moment Judith is left in the hands of her brother and becomes a child of abjection.

The new woman (Judith) is born of abjection. Michonne has a similar agency, coming into the story a mysterious samurai-sword wielding protector without a past. She saves Andrea and the two face a winter together in the wild, but also distances herself from Carl and Judith, and other children once she becomes part of the prison (Rick’s) group. She can survive alone, that she has proven, but she cannot live with the abject (zombies) and instead engages with a group of survivors at a distance. She is not looking to mother any more than Carol, and neither former mother takes up the role. Instead, these three women focus on treating children as little survivors in need of education, with abilities regardless of gender or age. Baby Judith, because she cannot protect herself, is passed amongst the survivors—Carl, Rick, Beth, Tyreese, Daryl, Hershel, and Maggie—and mothering is shared by the group. Daryl, Glenn, Maggie, and Michonne obtain baby formula on missions, replacing mothers’ milk via group action. All become mother.

It is moving from Kristeva back to Butler where the ramifications of gender and the child-in-abject come into play. Butler notes, “the idea of life is often at the very center of feminist theory” and asks:

Under what conditions should life come into being, and through what means? Who cares for life as it emerges? Who tends for the life of the child? Who cares for life as it wanes? Who cares for the life of the mother, and of what value is it ultimately? And to what extent does gender, coherent gender, secure a life as livable? (loc. 2824)

It is as if Butler is wrestling with this moment of abjection, mothering, and gender as she tries to explore the meaning behind gender performance. In *AMC’s TWD*, Lori questions if she should continue her unplanned pregnancy, an early exploration of this question of the abject in season 2. As Lori questions what kind of life a child would live in this new world and without consulting the potential fathers—Rick and Shane—she decides to take a Plan B abortion drug but then regurgitates it in a panic. In this case a woman wrestles with the abject within herself—a question
of bringing life into a world of literal death. Later in season 6, Maggie also becomes pregnant, a
decided action between her and her husband Glenn. They both decide this is their path together
and life must continue regardless of abject horror; and both will care for life and have chosen it
over death.

Life becomes a question in itself. Before season 3, the group are still replicating the
gender norms they grew up with, but those norms cannot carry on to subsequent generations if
they are living a nomadic survivalist existence. Their whole reality is abject. Therefore, whether
Carl prevents an already deceased Lori, who undergoes an amateur C-section, from becoming a
zombie or if he actively kills his unconscious, yet still dying, mother with an act of mercy, the
abject horror of a son ending his mother may be the clearest moment of separation between the
world that was and the world that is26. A twist to Oedipal psychology, the son having to kill his
mother instead of his father and then, essentially, become “mother” to his own sister, plays out a
gender switch in abject in consistent ways. Carl is able to recognize the separation between
himself and his mother in this action, and he can take her place in his sister’s life. For Judith, “the
chora” or Kristeva’s most existential development stage (0-4months) does not exist as her brother
becomes her mother in a very violent abjection (Kristeva 10). The next generation is born directly
into the abject with her brother as well as a mixed-gender group playing mother and forming her
earliest identity. Judith, and subsequent generations of children, will grow without the culturally
ingrained and gendered markers that others have, even if they try to teach her how it was, she will
have to learn how it is.

In a world turned upside down, the abject reality allows for a shift in perception. The
reality is that the women come to distrust their own assumptions that the men know better and
later the men’s assertions they know “the way,” and all come to realize no one person can fix this

26 “Killer Within” - S3:E4. This episode and the death of Lori is the beginning of a mental breakdown
for Rick. The remainder of the session he suffers hallucinations. Up until this point, he was still trying to
recreate a simple world of security and sustainability. The shift after this point marks Rick’s departure
from optimism and the past into realism with a nihilistic tinge.
new world. They must approach their challenges as a group, as a unit of friends and jury of peers, to survive. This group forms the baseline for civilization, as it is, and norms are reformed with all members participating. It is a certain irony that a prison allows this group the freedom to recreate a semblance of society and reframe their roles within the group. Rick, in his “farmer” period, shuns leadership and a mixed-gender board of leaders, a committee, forms because the pressure to lead and decide is too much for one man, “one person” Hershel pronounces. The weight of leadership is not designated gender specific, though it have felt normal in a world gone crazy to find a leader and not construct leadership as a shared burden. This shift towards egalitarian leadership and consensus allows others to make decisions and focus the group as they reform a society where all can participate.

Society has dissolved into small bands of companions, “friend(s)” as Tyreese eloquently names Judith and Carol27, regulating their own survival with budding moral, ethical, and mythological constructions. The spectrum of performance in this new world becomes much narrower as survival trumps the extremes of performance, especially feminine performance. The shift away from femininity and towards masculinity and neutral performance happens within during season 3. In this world women, when shown as mothers, are on the more feminine extreme of the spectrum (arguably a 2 or 3, Fig.1). Lori and Carol, when performing as mothers, cannot protect their children from carnage. Mothers offer little in the way of innovation and are powerless to enact a plan, so fall into supporting roles to the male characters like Rick, Shane, Daryl and the Governor (men in uniform as police officers, a hunter/biker, and a dictator respectively, on the spectrum 11 and 12, see Fig. 1). It seems acceptable to operate from a 5 through a 12 on this scale for survival (skirts seem generally impractical). The people within these groups were members of the fallen society, raised with the sense of what it meant to function in the world as a man or woman. As already examined in Butler, gender norms become

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27 “No Sanctuary” - S5:E1
ingrained from a very early age, and the stereotypical expectations of one’s role, as a man or a woman, is generally normative28.

While they worry over their children, mothers are ineffective survivors stifling their weeping as they hide from danger. This is significant as it is stereotypical for feminine women to hide from danger and let a man protect them (inaction versus action). When death takes their children from them, like for Michonne and later Carol, women are hard, distant, and silent stoics; and I have already established stoicism is functional element of the masculine narrative. They move aggressively into the active, not waiting for men to initiate action or they die. Both Carol and Michonne hide or bury the fact they were mothers as time goes on. They are loners guided by their pain and become warriors, perhaps dangerously entering into the 11 and 12 on the spectrum at times. Lori’s death is fitting because she is a holdover mother from that pre-zombie society and thus is not one for this new world. She constantly expected a man (or men, Shane, Rick, and Glenn all had) to risk their lives for her. Her death removes the most sentimental postpartum-motherhood sentiment from the story and subsequently highlights single-fatherhood. Carol, the only other mother (who we witness lose her child), consistently refuses an assumed foster-mother role to sisters, Lizzie and Mika, and baby Judith. Carol chastises Lizzie for calling her mom, and insists they are instead friends. Therefore, a small village of male and female friends raises Judith and the girls until Carol is driven to kill mentally unstable Lizzie after she kills her little sister. Mothers generally don’t kill children, but Carol has moved so far beyond motherhood. If Barkman’s perception of male biological leadership has any value, it is perhaps not biological maleness she finds valuable, but the masculine gender side of the spectrum that equates to a survival role. Women take on masculinity in their actions, appearance and emotional restraint. Those who cannot, do not readily survive29.

28 For more discussion of gender roles and the creation of social role expectations, see Butler’s Gender Trouble.
29 Though it is coming in Season 7, if the writers continue to remix the graphic novel plot, where
Men are also using gender, putting on extreme masculinity while posturing control and enforcing their leadership rights on society. Patriarchal deference is at play in Woodbury, where the reign of the über-masculine Governor attempts to recreate a similar society to that which fell (with the addition of a mostly beta-male militia). Though we do not know much about the specific societal roles of residents, we see familiar markers like women in clean dresses and leisure-wear walking in the streets, cuddling children, and being protected as if they are themselves children incapable of fighting. There are few women on border watch, but they still take orders from men and writers have characterized them as boastful incompetents.

In Woodbury, Andrea, whose norms were established within Rick’s group, directly attempts to challenge male control of weapons, security, and leadership (as her group has begun to move past old gender binaries). Instead she faces the patriarchal deference of this culture in this place; she is constantly diverted and placated, and sexualized as a “pretty blond” by the Governor and his men. That she seems to kowtow to masculine dominance time and again in Woodbury when, conversely, she challenged status quo more forcefully with Rick’s group, can be directly related to the replication of old gender norms in Woodbury and her desire to fit into the similar social group that, on the surface, appears safe, normal, and familiar. As much as Andrea was the voice of feminist dissention in the first two seasons, being met with someone registering a 12 on the gender spectrum chart seems to weaken her assertiveness and ability to speak out because it is possible she still longs for her position in society before its fall: outspoken “bitch.” As I will explain in the next section, the heterosexual power dynamics between Andrea and the Governor directly repress her agency and power. The über-masculine renders the pre-zombie feminist powerless and it seems likely that her agency is only recovered in her act of suicide after

women in Negan’s group operate as sexual slaves and polygamous wives to uber-masculine leadership, this argument can be adapted to include women performing a warped femininity as a means to garner protection and as a tool of necessity. Negan’s weapon, a bat he calls Lucielle, is personified and sexualized as a violent woman, taking the whole shift of femininity to another level. It will be interesting to revisit this later.
a walker bites her.

Functioning alone and more towards the masculine on the spectrum for much longer, Michonne can see that the “normal” in Woodbury is so out of place in this zombie-plagued world. It is false. In a place where “characters exhibit behavior based on traditional gender roles—[Woodbury] comes off as strange in a world where the top priority is survival.”

Michonne is distrustful of the Governor and his obvert masculinity, perhaps because she has functioned longer on her own, in absence of any society. She can see his bravado as empty because his actions (deceit, blatant lies, murder) is patriarchal posturing. His level-12 masculinity is as apparent as the sword she carries. It is also possible that as a black woman, she was already distrustful of white masculinity and patriarchal pre-zombie society. This new world offers her escape from both her position as a woman, but more importantly as a black woman. She embodies a silent strength and hesitance to trust anyone, especially this white, southern, post-apocalyptic Mayberry-esque town and its charismatically untrustworthy dictator. Michonne knows is eerie that people are having a suburban BBQ complete with iced-down lemonade and cold brews when just outside the fence survivors like her are killing walkers with the ease of Woodbury’s children picking flowers. The residents hide the abject behind false normalcy and empty storefronts. For one who has progressed beyond such façade, it is all performance.

**Women wielding power**

More active, powerful women are divided from passive women. Though Andrea and Michonne were friends, they are separated by a drive for action. Perhaps Andrea’s winter illness weakened her resolve and Michonne’s protection and care shifted the scales of gender on the spectrum for the two women, but their relationship changed when Andrea sought masculine protection and security. Steiger points out that this relationship, as with many women on *AMC’S*
*TWD*, would pass the Bechdel test\(^3\): this series has more women existing in their own relationships without discussion of men than many on TV today. The women operated for almost a year within a homosexual friendship whose power dynamics exist outside of a heterosexual norm. Michonne enters *TWD* on her own terms with two male walkers, emasculated and mutilated, in chains, to save another woman. These two women, a sharpshooter and a katana-master, are paired together similarity for their weapon skills, but also opposition in their willingness to submit/challenge the fold of past social norms. Michonne continues on after Andrea’s death because she will always choose action over stagnancy. Michonne does not bend, but meets men and women on the same level.

While Butler’s argument refers to those bending, rejecting, or reinventing gender, I think her discussion of gender lends itself to this environment because the cis-gendered, heteronormative holdovers are forced to confront and understand what it means to be “man”, “woman”, or even a “coherent gender” in this world. Butler argues the “sexual hierarchy produces and consolidates gender. It is not heterosexual normativity that produces and consolidates gender, but the gender hierarchy that is said to underwrite heterosexual relations” *(Gender* loc.159). The power dynamic of heterosexual relationships forms ‘woman’ and ‘man’ while the distribution of power, then, under normative conditions locates ‘man’ as the primary origin and ‘woman’ in relation and outside of the axis of power. This is best exemplified in Andrea’s reversion to a weaker expression of femininity when confronted later with the glossy Governor and façade of normalcy in Woodbury. The heterosexual tension between the two create the power dynamic. The audience is left baffled, because we are privy to the background

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\(^3\) Popularized by cartoonist Alison Bechdel in 1985, it has become the “standard by which feminist critics judge television, movies, books, and other media” *(Steiger loc. 1725)*. The story must have two women (minimum) and they must talk about something other than a man. Andrea and Michonne operate in a bubble for the first five minutes of “Walk With Me” - S3:E3, but the concept is that they have been traveling together for several months over the winter and have formed a bond in that time. After these 5 minutes, their on-screen time circulates around the men that have “rescued” them and The Governor.
psychosis of the Governor and brutality of his men, as to why the once tough and feminist-leaning Andrea, who fought the homemaking womanly gender roles with Rick’s group, would be so eager. Following Butler’s insight, the connection between their gender expression and sexual tension should not be surprising. Perhaps the power inherent in Andrea’s feminist pre-zombie mentality is repressed when she re-enters an established culture. She longs to stay because of the normalcy and is willing to submit to her heterosexual lover. For all Andrea’s rhetoric about being as good a shot as a man, for being a protector, she welcomes being sexualized by the Governor and seen again for the femininity she had repressed. Her sexual desires function to re-indoctrinate her into heteronormative feminine passivity.

In the end, Andrea is beaten by the Governor and chooses to kill herself over turning into a zombie. Having a strong woman commit suicide leaves the audience to wonder if the distinctions between men and women, gender roles themselves, have any bearing on power or sanity at all. By season 5, the strength, cunning, and skill of the survivor becomes the way to measure his or her character. Whether it be Carol evoking a level-12 Rambo and single-handedly breeching Terminus with explosions and skills worthy of the manliest hero, or big manly Tyreese staying behind and opting to care for baby Judith because he cannot kill anymore, flips gender assumptions on their head. The audience becomes the one to question why a large black man becomes soft and motherly and how domestic abuse survivor Carol becomes a pillar of strength and fortitude. Carol leaves behind the “smart-mouth uppity bitch” Ed labeled Andrea, and instead uses gender as a mask, becoming a “gutless bitch” in order to disarm her captors and play off their assumptions. Otherwise, Carol is just a survivor.

Though Steiger does not believe the Michonne/Andrea relationship is the best example of

32 “Forget” - S6:E13, though Paula, their captor and Alpha female in Negan’s group, calls Maggie a dumb uppity bitch it is Carol who is playing the weak and dumb card. She clutches a rosary, hyperventilates herself, and weeps crocodile tears in an attempt to illicit sympathy from Paula. It doesn’t work fully, for as an Alpha female, Paula is aware of the power women are capable of and lengths they will go through to survive, but it does make Paula underestimate just how active and powerful Carol really is.
a positive Bechdel-test, later episodes contain more and more active and forceful women survivors, coming to a head during season 6, episode 13, “The Same Boat.” When Rick’s group aims to take down the Saviors, Carol stays behind with Maggie at the vehicles. She is upset the now pregnant Maggie would even come on this mission. She urges her to go home, but instead the both of them are captured by three of the Savior’s women: Molly, Michelle, and Paula. These women captivate 90% of the episode screen-time. Carol again wears femininity as terror and weakness while Paula expounds on her pre-zombie life:

Paula: What are you so afraid of? So scared, you can't even stick to your own principles.
Carol: You don't want me to stick to my own principles.
Paula: I was a secretary before. I fetched coffee for my boss and made him feel good about himself. I spent most of my days reading stupid inspirational e-mails to try and feel good about myself. [...] No matter how many times I refilled his damn cup, it was just never enough. I was at work when the Army took over DC. We weren't allowed to leave. They had to evacuate all the important people first--members of Congress, government employees. So I was stuck with my boss. Not my family--my husband, my four girls... (sniffles) My boss was weak and stupid and he was going to die and he was going to take me down, too. He was the first person I killed so that I could live. I stopped counting when I hit double digits. That's right around the time I stopped feeling bad about it. I am not like you. I'm still me, but better. I lost everything and it made me stronger.

She does not know that Carol's fear is her ruse and that Carol is very much like Paula. The difference is that Paula is part of a group with different norms and values, though the audience has yet to know the details. She finds strength in her ability to kill without fear or regret and feels powerful because of it. Carol is finding fear in that she has killed so much without feeling guilt. We can tell that Paula has taken on a leadership role, directing the other two women and planning to cross Rick's rescue efforts. Here are two strong women, one posturing strength and control (Paula), the other manipulating through a show of weakness (Carol). Paula has flipped the heterosexual power dynamic claiming Pete (who she cold-cocked with her pistol and is dying on
the floor) is "just a warm body for [her] bed." In taking on masculinity in both action and expression, Paula operates as a leader who feels contempt for the weakness of 'women'. Carol ends up (regretfully) killing both Paula and Michelle; the breadth of Carol's gender performativity is unstable as she is simultaneously performing masculinity with ease and feeling femininity with regret. While the lasting effects of this action—Carol flees Alexandria under cover of night because she cannot embody the level 12 masculinity any longer—still remain to be realized, The value comes from the weight and morality that show through Carol’s actions. The full spectrum of gender she is using is a full expanse of human experience and ability, and is clearly difficult to bear.

Women survivors are operating in opposition to their pre-zombie position on the gender spectrum, and their challenge to what was triggers the possibility for room on our gender spectrum, room to further blur divisions between genders. Women have far more space to operate within normal gender performance when it is fully acceptable and expected for masculinity performance from all. Having lived with expectations of vanity, weakness, fear, and passivity, it is second nature to put these back on when looking to disarm a foe or meet some expectation of "woman". They also have, thanks to the woman’s movement and feminist theory, already moved towards abilities and realms of men. In our culture, it has been taboo for men, especially masculine-performing men, to make a similar shift towards or into the feminine. Tyreese is not afforded the same leeway as judged by fan reactions. A quick read through online fan communities shows Carol and Tyreese's gender performance role-reversals are thought of positively by some and completely implausible by others. Their direct rejection of their previous position on the gender spectrum becomes a rabidly discussed point in the show fandom, which shows how the performance of gender is central to our understanding and acceptance of "reality". More fans want to believe Carol can move from beaten women to superhero than believe Tyreese would move from ex-football linebacker to nanny. These two contradictions were together, playing house in a little cottage in the woods, after the fall of the prison, caring for the sisters and
baby Judith, like a family.

Masculinity may be just as fragile PZO. As I mentioned before, it was Carol, not Tyreese, who had to kill Lizzie; he says later of that experience—“it broke me.” Afterwards he clung to Judith while Carol went out to save the group. Though he spoke of Judith as “a friend,” he cared for her like his daughter. Later, a child-zombie bites Tyreese; he is the only character in the series attacked and killed by a child-zombie. He begins hallucinating ghosts, and he openly weeps when he admits to his guilt-vision ghost of the Governor that he forgave Carol for killing his girlfriend back at the prison. He dies embracing mercy and forgiveness, soothed by words and images of Lizzie and Mika, two weaknesses out of place in this new world. Our own cultural values understand the move towards the masculine as logical for survival and the move towards the feminine as fearful regression into weakness.

The very existence of the AMC version of Carol speaks to the interconnectedness between the creators and the audience. The force that is Carol, in addition to the invention of Daryl, are two of the series’ most acclaimed remixes. While I earlier stepped away from the strictly comics-based critics, Kay Steiger’s analysis of the books does, however, allow for the argument that specific decisions were made to the characters, plot, and depictions of gender (and race) perhaps, in part, in response to the audience conversation about the comics. In fact, Steiger notes the blogosphere fandom concerning feminist and racial issues discussed many of the failings fans found within the founding issues of the comic in relation to race and gender. These failings, like the two-dimensionality of the comic’s Carol character, influenced the show runners to use the character to make certain statements about how people change when put into survival

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33 “Strangers” - S5:E2, 23:00
34 I will mention that Carol, a character that has reached heights of agency, power, and respect in the AMC series, committed suicide at the prison in the comic books. The comic book character defined herself in relation to traditional gender roles so much so that she attempted to initiate a plural marriage with Rick and Lori after her lover, Tyreese, was seduced by Michonne. She slits her wrists. In the show, these characters do not have romantic relationships, either.
35 Insert fangirl swoons across social media
situations. While it may be a reach to suggest a direct correlation (Olmstead 331), it would be
naive to believe the 7 years of fan conversation and 78 comic book issues of TWD before the
2010 production had no effect on page to small-screen adaptation. That Carol becomes a very
calculated departure from the source material is interesting because it creates a depth of message
in relation to gender performance and womanly strength. Carol remains in the series and “sounds
like a damn war” of gender performativity.

Life in general becomes like a war as well. The violence and brutality women face comes
to challenge the identity of these surviving women. In Undoing Gender, Butler resees her earlier
gender work “explicitly in terms of the questions of violence, and the possible transformation of
the scene of gender violence into a future of social survival” (loc. 2847). Essentially, aspects of
gendered violence can shift gender identity and acceptance. The Governor’s Alpha masculinity
and actions of violence on all, especially women, aligns excessive masculinity with insanity. We
cannot accept him as a leader because he is evil. When the all-male band of Claimers capture and
begin to rape both Michonne and Carl in front of Rick, crazed-Rick bites out the throat of his
captor and then guts his son’s rapist in front of the group. It is horrifying and this male-gendered
rape-violence is a theme that unequivocally colors the perception of extreme masculinity
throughout the series. Male-on-male, male-on-female, and male-on-child violence tilts towards
the darker end of on-screen violence, even worse than the endlessly creative and gory walker
kills. The abject become more about the darkness living within humanity and not the swarming
flies of zombies. In as much as the Governor set up a rape-torture chamber with Michonne in
mind, it was Andrea tied to the dental/torture chair and at the receiving end of a bad beating. It is
as if she is taking the punishment for falling backwards into the comfort and prior weakness of
her old gender role. She could have used her act of femininity as a tool to get into the Governor’s
bed (which she did) and then kill the evil man, but she does not. Carol even encourages her to

36 “No Sanctuary” S5:E1
“give him the night of his life then…” she hands Andrea a knife. But the ultra-feminine does not act. Andrea is not like Carol and cannot apply the guise of femininity and sexuality to mask her intentions. Andrea has not progressed. With her eventual death\(^{37}\), women like Carol, Michonne, Maggie, and Sasha can now own that strength, decisive action, and distance aids survival.

Women of action can save other women or men, they can also manipulate situations based on their presentation of gender, but women of action can physically hurt, maim, and kill as well. Female-on-female physical violence is rare, but occurs later in the series with the introduction of Officer Dawn Lerner. She leads a team of the officers holding indebted survivors captive at Grady Memorial Hospital. She killed her male commanding officer because he was “too soft”\(^{38}\). She believes the only thing holding everything thing together is force, fear, and negative reinforcement, and she is convinced they are all going to be saved by someone soon. The female-on-female violence when she strikes Beth for no clear reason\(^{39}\) is her idea of controlling and maintaining the respect of the (male) officers she leads. She allow them to rape the recovering survivors, who function as slaves running the hospital’s operations, while she and her band of officers run protection and security missions. Dawn never leaves the “home” of the hospital and continues to insist “what we had before [the outbreak...] isn’t over.”\(^{40}\) She is an alpha-female whose masculine pre-zombie job as a police officer has warped into a frantic mask of masculinity. She insists they are waiting to be saved and meanwhile she is functioning with a mask of masculinity over a terrified femininity. Her mask is faltering so she uses violence as a means to insist upon her masculine performance and power without understanding that violence is not the same as strong leadership. Dawn’s gender expression is not tinged with the survivalist reality of women who have had to enter the wild. She holds tight to order and forces a home and structure upon a crumbling institution. Violence and control is her expression of this denial, and

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\(^{37}\) “This Sorrowful Life” - S3:E15  
\(^{38}\) “The Same Boat” - S5:E7  
\(^{39}\) “Slabtown” - S5:E4  
\(^{40}\) “Slabtown” - S5:E4, 16:01
is what ultimately kills her. When she kills Beth in front of Rick’s rescue squad, she is almost as quickly killed by Daryl, without every coming to terms with the reality of the new world.

Though the shift in the gender spectrum is most evident in Carol’s character, Beth also grows into adult (woman)hood as the series progresses. While still under her father, Hershel’s roof, Beth is 16, her mother already dead. Her path towards active and realized adult plays through a span of gender spectrum. She has a nervous breakdown\textsuperscript{41}, attempts suicide\textsuperscript{42}, flees into the wild with the group, fights off walkers and Woodbury militia, “mothers” baby Judith, and flees again into the wild escaping the destruction of the prison with Daryl. She ages from 16 to 19 in the span of 5 seasons and quickly learns that childhood and feminine weakness has no place if one wishes to survive. She makes a distinct move towards independent agency in her time with Daryl, and comes to understand (and somewhat convince Daryl) she has enough power in herself to survive\textsuperscript{43}. In the hospital, Beth plans a daring escape for both her and Noah, and though she is caught, she is satisfied he can be free\textsuperscript{44}. Though she is held against her will, she is not waiting for rescue. Though afraid, she is not frozen by it. Her death is a loss to the whole group because she was not killed because of her action, a reckless attempt at killing Dawn. This moment is the sole action of female-on-female murder of a main character up until this point, and ends in both women’s deaths.

Rising levels of violence on behalf of these active women increases into an almost second nature. By season 6, Sasha is the markswoman for the group. Rosetta teaches basic weaponry to residents and takes out Saviors. It further entrenches women into the masculine side of the gender spectrum. However, it is less likely for men to dip into the more feminine segment of the spectrum though it also happens. Tyreese is a large man who cannot shoot a gun yet, in a blind fit

\textsuperscript{41} “Cherokee Rose” - S2:E4
\textsuperscript{42} “18 Miles Out” - S2:E10
\textsuperscript{43} “Still” - S4:E12
\textsuperscript{44} “Slabtown” - S5:E4
of rage, is able to overpower and decimate an entire gymnasium of walkers with only a hammer, yet he shifts after his girlfriend is murdered, becoming a more passive and gentle babysitter for Judith and the sisters. The swings from violent, almost unhinged raging masculinity to nonviolent, tender, and pacifist, show Tyreese as a man trying to gain some balance and finding middle ground difficult. His answer to all the violence is an extreme the women have abandoned, passivity, but given his size and strength, balance is demanding as others assume his masculine status is a given. He does not want to lead, but his questioning of the leadership and his offering of alternative (optimistically less violent) solutions offers the viewer hope that he is working towards a gender role without extremes; still, his passivism becomes a violation as threats he could have removed come back to kill (and eat) others in the group. His performance of masculinity becomes so minimal that it is not surprising his own inaction leads to his death. He never finds the balance on the spectrum.

The world of *AMC’s TWD* operates with a more neutral gender performance as a means of practicality and survival. Relationships thrive on equality and saving each other (physically, emotionally, spiritually); Maggie and Glenn’s prison engagement and then marriage, struggles with bonds of what they knew (Hershel’s patriarchal household) to a new construct (egalitarian household) out of survival, and dare I say, progress? They lose each other and both take action to search for the other twice during the series. They show that both men and women are active participants in survival, rescue, protection, and family. For this group of survivors, the paradigm of traditional gender roles in heteronormative relationships is destroyed along with the society that held onto the importance of those outdated roles. As much as traditional femininity wanes as the series progresses, in 6 seasons, *AMC’s TWD* has only five on-camera ‘sex’ scenes.

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45 “Walk With Me” - S3:E3
46 Lori/Shane S1:E2, Lori/Rick S1:E3, Maggie/Glenn S2:E4 (off-camera) and 3:15, Andrea/Shane S2:E6 (off-camera) Andrea/Governor S3:E6 (off camera), Abraham/Rosita S5:E5; Michonne/Rick S6:E10 (off-camera)
Refreshingly, *AMC's TWD* does not play towards the hypersexualization of the female body as many other post-apocalyptic and zombie films do (Murray, Harper). As the series progresses, women become more functionally dressed in gear and layers, far from fashion, trend, or even cleanliness. They do not wear pink, lace, or delicate leathers, mini-skirts and frills. Instead, the default is neutral-to-masculine, functional, rugged, and muted. Harper notes the sexual way in which women in zombie and apocalyptic cinema plays to tantalize and attract the male gaze in an otherwise gory horror film like *Resident Evil*. The performance of gender in *AMC's TWD*, by season 5, includes functional, filthy, wardrobe for both men and women. It does not appear that women are adopting menswear, but instead that the functional and lasting versions of woman's clothes are smarter options. All members embrace function over fashion.

Equality is spread not only between men and women, but also across race and class (to some extent), and age as well. Education has changed from season 1, when Lori helps Carl with math work to Carol teaching the children about knives, weapons and protection at the prison. Children can no longer remain sheltered innocents. Survival means knowing how to protect themselves and others in this new world. Enid, who survived on her own for a long time after her parents were both killed, enters the group as an example of a young woman who embraces the active and knows she must protect herself. Children raised in this new society don’t have the pop culture references to shape their gender identity, only the examples of adults. If both men and women are performing the same tasks, or if women are displaying high levels of masculinity and men elements of femininity, the performance children will learn is much different from the pre-zombie world. How will Judith learn what a woman is without a mother-type or culture to reference? The next 'genderation' will perhaps find more equality and understanding than generations of feminists bogged down and working within the cultures they live within.

47 Harper discusses women's hypersexualization in zombie films, as does Stabile regarding the comic series in opposition to women in mainstream comic cannon (90-91), and both heteronormative and alternative sexualization in Murry (8-11).
Current feminist scholars have pushed research and discussion of motherhood to the margins in the last 15 years (Kawash 996). Since the second-wave of feminism, roles for women have greatly expanded beyond mother, and some argue women who defy that role embody a power that traditional-role women do not (Kawash 982). Yet motherhood is very much part of popular culture, especially on television (Walters and Harrison). In *AMC’s TWD*, the treatment of mothers and motherhood seems to mirror the cultural shift in our understanding of “mother” as a role and “mother” as a woman. Perhaps functioning too closely to traditional femininity, traditional motherhood must also die. The post-apocalyptic woman, like Carol, is an active friend to children, much in the same way that a teacher or other adult may be, and she is not overly concerned with the effect of the horror on others around her. She is far more rational, logical, and progressive than the traditional mother (Freehling-Burton 78); she learns to wield weapons with amazing accuracy and fight through gore and fear like a warrior. Like Carol and Michonne, she is anything but motherly. In their place are fathers, like Rick, whose children witness his leadership and bouts of insanity. The village takes over and all look to care for the children.

**Conclusion**

Passing from season 1 (the months after the event) to the current season (a few years after the event), the shifts in womanhood are telling of larger moves in the creation of a new feminist culture. We are past the point of recreating or mimicking what was and are in the heart of survival in the present. The reunion of Judith and her father and brother was an emotional high that connected so totally to something that was almost lost – family\(^{48}\). It is a sign of hope for a new generation of women brought up by men to survive in an environment where equality is all they have. Fatherhood, played out by Rick and Carl and Judith, remains one of the only redeeming masculine attributes. Held-over from lives before event-zero, traditional feminine and masculine roles lead to disaster and death; to survive and participate PZO, women adapt the feminist agency

\(^{48}\) “Strangers” - S5:E2
carried by waves of feminist theory, finding a closer equality by dropping soft femininity. The successful men also embrace feminist ideals and share their agency. Those who hold fast to the soft, weak image of a woman needing protection (Dale, the Grady Police) or a beating (Ed, Shane) do not survive, for men who encourage and support empowered womanhood, who work to embrace feminist ideology, live. Both genders move far closer to a middle ground, though women move far further into the masculine, and this allows a shared duty to protect all and value all members. I believe it remains problematic that women lose far more—children, motherhood, and femininity—in the push towards equality, and this drastic loss changes the intrinsic meaning of womanhood in this world. It is just as hard, calculating, and cold as manhood was before, and perhaps the audience can see manhood as a bit softer now because its extreme verges on crazy.

Perhaps our only regret is that it has taken the end of civilization to find the equality generations of women strove to obtain. Equality can only be performed in the most dire survivalist fantasy. Butler writes of the act of social transformation involving us all as “lay philosophers, presupposing a vision of the world, of what is right, of what is just, of what is abhorrent, of what human action is and can be, of what constitutes the necessary and sufficient conditions of life” (2004, loc. 2817). The acceptance of the roles of gender, of humanity, in the world is evolving with the interaction, conversation, labor, and agreement of the society. We can look to TWD and philosophically deconstruct how extraneous elements of traditional femininity are valued as tools to disarm and manipulate others. There is more of the performance of gender than outward appearance.

Moving towards the center of the spectrum, there is almost a fluid resignification of gender roles. The nature and violence of the social shift requires women to move further than men because the sphere of domesticity, the home of traditional femininity, has been destroyed or is forever altered. Carol and Michonne do not want to mother, will not mother, and refuse to hide reality from children. Though Carol puts on the mask of femininity for the residents of the Alexandria Safe Zone, it is because they expect the performance of gender from a woman to align
with their holdover community. The residents are sheltered in their homes without wild knowledge. Femininity becomes a farce of protection that she puts on to create an identity that is passive, weak, and harmless; in reality, the feminine mask is all the more dangerous because the desire for innocence and safety is alluring in a world gone-zombie.

Instead, the feminine cannot exist in reality as it did pre-zombie because the world no longer provides the context for its reference. It is a tempting lure to bait prey. When Carol goes so far as to threaten a child with death when he catches her stealing guns from the armory, she does so with the sweetness of a scout-leader. The sweater twin-set wearing Carol claims she’s “the den mother” of the group\textsuperscript{49}, a “real people person”. Yet the audience knows she is anything but. She operates under guise of femininity and mother to get information, meet their expectations, and hide her agenda as she did with the weapon lessons during story-time with the children at the prison. This Carol can balance a warm casserole in one hand while threatening an abusive man at knifepoint with the other\textsuperscript{50}. She is unassuming with a smile on her face and matching outfit on her body. The post-apocalyptic woman may no longer be a mother or a wife, but she can play the role for her benefit and protection. Women can use gender expectations like any other weapon if they don’t go too far into the feminine extreme. There is a level of managed application, an edge to feminine expression that must reflect some awareness (through fear and perhaps religion) of the savagery of the world in order to pull-off the mask.

\textit{AMC’s The Walking Dead} can challenge the lived assumptions of gender roles for the audience. Butler offers, “theory is not sufficient for social and political transformation. Something besides theory must take place, such as interventions at social and political levels that involve actions, sustained labor, and institutionalized practice, which are not quite the same as the exercise of theory” (2004, loc. 2815). This essay, by extension, is looking within the text of \textit{AMC’S TWD}, the social and political practices of the community, the action of sustained labors

\textsuperscript{49} “Remember” - S5:E12, 10:00
\textsuperscript{50} “Conquer” - S5:E16
and practices of the characters, to establish how the upheaval of the dead rising enables the normative gender polarity of man and woman to mutate into something new. Maybe we can find strength and take action against our own abject monsters. Butler continues:

What this means for gender, then, is that it is important not only to understand how the terms of gender are instituted, naturalized, and established as presuppositional but to trace the moments where the binary system of gender is disputed and challenged, where the coherence of the categories are put into question, and where the very social life of gender turns out to be malleable and transformable. (loc.2974)

In identifying the cultural conventions that have built gender into a binary, and recognize where elements challenge this system, we are able to transcend the restrictions and assumptions. We can use gender instead of being used by the system that assumes. In TWD, survival sets the tone for naturalization of participant performance. Gender plays less of a role than does activity and participation in the group. All, regardless of age, sex, race, or gender must participate within the middle-to-masculine segment of the gender spectrum in order to survive the harsh and violent world. For women, the malleability of their gender expression is a key element of their survival. Those with a broad and aware performance are best suited to disarm others. People don’t have to be one gender but can realize the depths they can work within.

AMC’S TWD presents us with the development of a much tightened gender spectrum⁵¹ that all but loses the feminine extremes out of practicality and brings men and women towards a shared survival-based understanding in absence of polarized gender. “As a consequence of being in the mode of becoming, and in always living with the constitutive possibility of becoming otherwise, the body is that which can occupy the norm in myriad ways, exceed the norm, rework the norm, and expose realities to which we thought we were confined as open to transformation” (Butler, Undoing 2991). The survivors will encounter other social groups and will continuously

⁵¹ For more on Gender Spectrum and theory see: www.genderspectrum.org.
have to adapt to gender expectations, perform gender as expected by the groups they encounter, or decide to walk away. Women can put on camouflage of a “gutless bitch” and manipulate those who remain vested in old stereotypes and expectations. Their bodies are not their genders but the vessels to perform gender within whatever culture comes next. It seems the lack of pop culture and media strengthen women’s performance of authentic power, as they are not caught up in oppressive systems of feminine stereotypes and cultural expectations. The best part is that the performance of gender is malleable and adaptable, and it is the smart person who can choose how, when, and why to adopt elements of that performance and enable them to survive. It is ignorant to rely on old knowledge of people, and smarter to look to the culture they have more currently been a part of, because the culture sets expectations and monitors performance of its members. In groups where equality and a more limited gender spectrum is in action, the successes result in bonds and community that feminists today can appreciate. Extreme masculinity performance is still present, and dangerously unstable, as the next season will show. Dealing with this culture will require understanding how it stereotypes its members and sets expectations for others. If women like Carol can come in “like a war” again, with smart and focused manipulation, perhaps there is hope for Rick’s survivors.
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