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Queering the Family in *The Walking Dead*

John R. Ziegler

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“Ziegler thoroughly engages with both versions of *The Walking Dead*, uncovering the complexities—and failures—of the narrative in terms of human sexuality and familial relationships. This analysis is a must read for fans of the series, especially those interested in interrogating its depictions of sex, gender, and the apocalyptic family.”

—Kyle William Bishop, *Associate Professor of English,
Southern Utah University*

“Ziegler delivers a riveting deconstruction of the heteronormative, nuclear-family image as it is infected, dies, and shambles along with other decaying paradigms like the sacrosanct Child, the nurturing Mother, and even the relative safety of Community. While the zombies rot, a different sort of deterioration is at work within the survivors, and often the real monsters turn out to be those who continue to evolve, becoming something new—something not quite in line with our comforting standards of humanity.”

—Deborah G. Christie, *Ph.D.*, *Better Off Dead: The Evolution of the
Zombie as Post-human, Old Dominion University, VA*

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ISBN 978-3-319-99797-1 ISBN 978-3-319-99798-8 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-99798-8>

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018958514

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The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

PREFACE

It is a widely accepted tenet that works of horror generally and zombie media in particular arise from and comment on social and cultural anxieties. The range of such intersections is of course immense, and this project focuses specifically on social and cultural anxieties associated with transgressions of heteronormative values as they are depicted in *The Walking Dead*. The zombie renaissance discussed by noted zombie scholar Kyle William Bishop in his 2015 book on *How Zombies Conquered Popular Culture* shows little sign of abating, and *The Walking Dead* continues to occupy a central role in that conquest. The modern zombie, born in the films of George Romero, is an American creation, and there exists also a perhaps fundamentally American notion of the family. This book intends to examine the interplay between *The Walking Dead's* latter-day descendants of Romero's undead monsters and its representation of the dynamics of and ideology that supports and reproduces the dominant mode of familial organization.

Zombies are creatures, in most representations, including *The Walking Dead*, driven by desire rather than cognition. In direct contrast to the zombie horde, the family unit—its construction, boundaries, and functioning—has traditionally served as a locus of control over desires. The negotiation of different expressions of desire and family in the United States continues to be fractious, to say the least. Despite measurable social progress, practices such as same-sex or gender-nonconforming marriage and parenting and polyamory continue to fall under consistent cultural and political attack. Bisexuality similarly persists in being elided, even at times by putative allies. Such resistance to alternative sociosexual configurations often employs rhetorics of aberrance, unnaturalness, or irrationality, as well as invokes danger to (always

pure and innocent) children. Reading *The Walking Dead* franchise as directly participating in these social tensions and the discourses surrounding them, particularly given its extensive cultural reach, my project employs queer theory and cultural studies as its primary lenses in order to interrogate *The Walking Dead*'s resistance to nonnormative family structures (the normative unit being, of course, monogamous, heterosexual, and reproductive). Queer theory offers a productive way to analyze the zombie narrative's relationship to this nexus of drives, desire, power, and control, while cultural study situates such analysis within its (American) sociohistorical context.

This project, which builds on and expands an earlier articulation of its premise in essay form (Ziegler 2018), covers the first eight seasons of the television show and the first 144 issues of the comic book series. In doing so, it aims to fill in gaps in the academic conversation about *The Walking Dead*, while contributing to zombie studies as a whole. While queer theory has been increasingly applied to zombie media, there are still no book-length studies of sexuality, alternative or otherwise, in *The Walking Dead*, and comparatively little of the existing scholarship on the franchise deals with the comic books, despite the fact that graphic narratives are increasingly studied and taught academically. By considering the comics in conjunction with the television show, the project aims to produce a sustained, detailed analysis that will be of interest to scholars, students, and hopefully fans as well. In fact, average fans may be one of the most important groups that such a discussion needs to reach if it is to be anything more than (pardon the pun) an academic exercise. Like the survivors of a zombie apocalypse, one can only hope.

While comics share narrative and representational elements with film, they give rise to distinct audience encounters. Thus, in addition to paying close attention to language and visual composition in both the television and comics incarnations of *The Walking Dead*, this project strives to acknowledge in its readings the unique materiality of comics. Bishop (2006) points out that the originary text of the modern zombie, *Night of the Living Dead*, was influenced not only by other films such as *The Birds* but also by comic books (199). He later claims that movies achieve a reality effect by presenting images synchronically, which can be true of comics as well, if the reader so chooses, but comics also have a unique mode of communicating meaning that is different from those of film and television, and which I endeavor to account for in this project (201). My close reading of individual pages or panels acknowledges, for instance, the way in which a panel must use a snapshot to represent a larger action, as well as how it creates meaning, especially emotional meaning, through facial

expressions; the distances, reciprocities, and vectors of bodies; and “symbolic resources, such as ... sweat drops to represent surprise or anxiety” (Feng and O’Halloran 2012, 2069, 2081, 2072, 2074). Readers of comics must also fill in the narrative gaps within and between panels, constructing interpretations using both the “unfolding discourse” and “more abstract semiotic levels, such as context, style, or genre” (Bateman and Wildfeuer 2015, 185). Context, in this process, includes structural relationships among groups of panels, including the entire page as a unit of meaning (190, 193, 202).¹ Keeping these various levels of meaning-making in view will more usefully elucidate how Robert Kirkman’s creation, like much apocalyptic media, represents and, arguably, reinforces the “profound durability” of our social hierarchies (Gurr 2016, 166), but, in doing so, simultaneously helps us to question them and imagine other, counterhegemonic modes of being and relationality.

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NOTE

1. Bateman and Wildfeuer argue for a more complex interpretive relationship among panels on a page than that of linearly arranged moments in time (197, 200).

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to express my gratitude to everyone who has heard or read pieces of this project since its inception and played a part in its development: audiences at the Bronx Community College English Department Faculty Lecture Series, the International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts, and the Mid-Atlantic Popular and American Culture Association Conference; Dawn Keetley and Elizabeth Erwin; Shaun Vigil, Glenn Ramirez, and everyone at Palgrave; Steven Reilly, Bethany Holmstrom, and Shannon Proctor. I wish especially to thank Leah Richards, my partner in all senses of the word, and our small household of feline editorial assistants: Perdita, Renfield, Trey, and Benny.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Abstract This introduction argues that *The Walking Dead*'s zombie narrative reflects cultural anxiety over the family unit. Threats of familial destruction or conversion come not only from zombies but also from non-heteronormative relationalities. Lee Edelman implicates the family in reproductive futurism, which enforces heteronormativity and depends upon the figure of the Child, presumed guarantee of a social future. Zombies represent a queer challenge to reproductive futurism, which a zombie child intensifies. The traditional nuclear family's persistent dominance in the postapocalypse of *The Walking Dead* propels efforts to contain possibilities for alternative family structures, which repeatedly arise. Tracing how the franchise represents the transgression of heteronorms narratively, visually, and rhetorically reveals how recurring elements in those representations function to attempt to normalize, naturalize, and police sociosexual ideologies.

Keywords *The Walking Dead* • Nuclear family • Reproductive futurism • Zombies • Queer

A man explains to our hero that his group became cannibals out of desperation and poor hunting skills. They began with eating the “few kids” who were with them, after which “the thought of eating strangers was very easy to come to grips with” (c2:ch11:n65).¹ He maintains, however, that their

situation is to blame, and “[i]f there were **anything** else we could do to get by—we’d do it” (c2:ch11:n65). Our protagonists, whose own group has been attacked by these hunters of fellow humans, respond by brutally murdering all of them “after taking their weapons” (c2:c11:n66). Our hero, Rick Grimes, later recalls “every bloody bit,” “broken bone,” and “bashed in skull” inflicted as they “**mutilated** those people. Made the others watch as we went through them ... one by one” (c2:ch11:n66). Despite this guilt, he maintains that their actions were “justifiable” (c2:ch11:n66).

Searching for gas, Rick Grimes, who had lain in a coma through the onset of the zombie apocalypse, walks through a field of abandoned cars that once formed an encampment. The camera, implying Rick’s gaze, sweeps over detritus, including a stroller, and lingers as it passes on a soiled doll baby, on its back and suggestive of a corpse. The bunny-slipped feet that he spies looking under a car turn out to belong not to a living “little girl” in need of protection but to a zombie (“Days Gone Bye”; see Fig. 1.1). Her body flies dramatically backward when Rick reluctantly shoots her through the head as she advances on him with increasing speed and menace, and the show cuts to its first ever opening credits.

On a desolate suburban street, the zombified wife of a man named Morgan walks up onto the porch of the house where she had stayed with him and their son, and in which she had died. She appears to try to see



Fig. 1.1 Rick encounters a zombie child

through the peephole and fruitlessly turns the doorknob on the locked door. Her behavior echoes the way that the zombie girl whom Rick had earlier met had stopped to pick up a teddy bear, as if she retained some aspect of her living identity. Explaining the situation with his wife, Morgan tells Rick, “I just didn’t have it in me” to “put her down” (“Days Gone Bye”).² Later, in juxtaposition with Rick mercy killing a decayed zombie missing her lower torso, Morgan has his wife in the crosshairs of his rifle (she seems to stare directly back at him), but, crying, cannot finally bring himself to pull the trigger.

Each of this trio of moments in the hugely popular *The Walking Dead*—the first from the comics and the second two from the television show—manifests an aspect of its moral universe that is important for examining how the franchise conceptualizes both the family and challenges to its traditional form and dominance. Both the cannibals and the way in which Rick and his group wipe them out with an extra dose of cruelty attest to what the show presents as the drastically altered ethics of a world overrun with the undead. The comics and the TV show both assert again and again that what is acceptable has changed profoundly. But does that apply to the family as well?

Much existing scholarship on zombies, including on *The Walking Dead*, examines the living dead in the context of post-9/11 anxieties.³ Steven Pokornowski (2014), for instance, surmises that cultural inundation with fears of terrorism may have driven the zombie’s resurgent popularity (loc. 1095).⁴ John Edgar Browning identifies 9/11 as the point after which zombie films began to emphasize “urban violence” and an “ambulatory impulse” in contrast to the Romero-inspired defense of a “survival space” (Castillo et al. 2016, 26). Kyle Bishop (2010) sees zombies’ current ascendancy as partly a result of the close post-9/11 echoes of the social and cultural upheaval of the 1960s and 1970s (25). While these observations identify a significant early driver of the twenty-first-century resurgence in zombie media and importantly inflect zombie studies, I propose in this book to trace in *The Walking Dead*’s zombie narrative a different strain of twenty-first-century cultural anxiety and conflict: the question of what constitutes a socially and politically acceptable family unit.

Bishop’s comparison of the contemporary American sociopolitical climate to contentious destabilization of the 1960s and 1970s is arguably even more accurate now than when he wrote it in 2010. Currently, setting aside the disruption of governmental norms, the sociopolitical landscape is riven by deep, seemingly entrenched, and often partisan divisions, including