ANGRY WHITE MEN: HOW *BREAKING BAD* AND *THE WALKING DEAD*
PREDICTED THE TRUMPIAN ZEITGEIST

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ABSTRACT

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      The archetypal protagonist of the modern "Golden Age of Television" is a maladjusted, White male struggling with feelings of marginalization. While this description applies to characters such as *Breaking Bad*'s Walter White, it is also used by political commentators to characterize what is popularly perceived to be the prototypical male supporter of President Donald Trump. When considering the cultural zeitgeist of the angry White man, are there any cultural and rhetorical connections between White, male Trump supporters who exhibit irrational feelings of marginalization and dramas such as *Breaking Bad* whose protagonists similarly exhibit and are motivated by such feelings? As a theorist and critical scholar of televised rhetoric and discourses, I am interested in analyzing such programming to determine whether these prestige antihero series invited viewers to contribute to the current masculinist movement under Trump and reassert dominance in response to perceived losses to women and minority groups. The specific episodes that will serve as case studies for this research into the relationship between modern prestige television and the cultural zeitgeist of Trump's America will be drawn from *Breaking Bad* and *The Walking Dead*, due to their cultural influence and visibility. My research will demonstrate that these series have operated as textual artifacts that contributed to forming the zeitgeist of the masculinized cultural moment which Trump serves as a figurehead of. Such research is relevant to modern American political and social discourse, thus providing a rich opportunity to expand on preexisting research into televisual influence on masculinity within a fresh context.

Keywords: *Breaking Bad*, critical discourse analysis, critical historiography, critical race theory, Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton, intersectionality, *The Walking Dead*, Trumpism

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CHAPTER 1. RATIONALE FOR STUDY AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

An explosion consumes a residential room in Casa Tranquila, a small nursing home and assisted living facility in Albuquerque, New Mexico, blowing the door off its hinges. A man, Gustavo "Gus" Fring, stumbles out of the smoke and smoldering ruin behind him. Half of his face has been torn off in the explosion, exposing his skull. Gus uses his final moments to calmly adjust his tie before collapsing to the ground, dead. Two other people have been killed in the explosion, although there will be no bodies to bury. Their only remains are the blood and viscera that now decorate the room's walls. Two of these murdered men, including Gus, were Latino; the third, an employee of Gus, was African American. The explosion was the result of a bombing orchestrated by a White man by the name of, fittingly, Walter "Walt" White. Such an incident is not uncommon in American history, particularly concerning race relations and hate crimes in the country. There is a tragic tradition of racial minorities in the United States encountering unexpected and untimely ends from the bombs or bullets of ignoble men who equate Whiteness with racial purity. However, the bombing at Casa Tranquila was not ostensibly racially motivated. Instead, Walt's singular goal was the elimination of Gus, his primary rival for control of Albuquerque's drug trade.

The bombing of Casa Tranquila occurs in "Face Off" (Gilligan, 2011), the literally titled season four finale of the crime drama *Breaking Bad*, which is commonly cited as one of the eminent texts of the modern Golden Age of Television, a term used to describe the significant aesthetical and narrative innovations in serialized television dramas beginning in the late 1990s (Damico & Quay, 2016; Sepinwall, 2015). However, this term can be construed as a misnomer, as the alleged Golden Age of the new millennium has largely failed to divert from historical trends and diversify representation in terms of racial or sexual minorities. Instead, the archetypal

protagonist of the current Golden Age is a maladjusted White man struggling with feelings of marginalization. While this description applies to characters such as *Breaking Bad*'s Walter White, it is also used by political commentators to characterize what is popularly perceived to be the prototypical male supporter of Donald Trump, who assumed presidency of the United States on January 20, 2017. Trump is a powerful business magnate, being the owner of the multinational Trump Organization, and a notable television personality, having produced and starred in NBC's *The Apprentice* reality show franchise from 2004 to 2015, which brought him popular recognition and exposure to the general public. Trump's business career and television appearances have both contributed to his status as a celebrity. Trump is also infamous for his outspoken personality and history of racist and misogynistic comments.[1] Trump frequently espoused such rhetoric during his presidential campaign, resulting in both he and his voter base being accused of harboring White supremacist leanings. Although Walt himself is never motivated by any sense of racial prejudice, the racial dynamics of *Breaking Bad* and other concurrent Golden Age dramas deserve critical attention, as do their gender dynamics. When considering the cultural zeitgeist of the angry White man, are there any cultural and rhetorical connections between White, male Trump supporters who exhibit irrational feelings of marginalization and dramas such as *Breaking Bad* whose protagonists similarly exhibit and are motivated by such feelings? Is it possible for popular television to exhibit any meaningful cultural, political, or social influence? While the answer to the first question will be developed over the course of this project, the answer to the second question is an easy, unequivocal yes.

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[1] Numerous credible allegations of sexual assault have also been made against Trump, although he "has dismissed all of the allegations – which include ogling, harassment, groping, and rape – as 'fabricated' and politically motivated accounts pushed by the media and his political opponents" (Relman, 2018).

Background on Television Series as Visually and Culturally Resonant Texts

Popular film and television texts are "important as public pedagogies because they play a powerful role in mobilizing meaning, pleasures, and identifications. They produce and reflect important considerations of how human beings should live, engage with others, define themselves, and address how a society should take up questions fundamental to its survival" (Giroux, 2001, p. 23 – 24). Television especially is a dominant influence on American society, serving as "a reflection of the national character and [being] the primary means by which Americans have defined themselves and each other" (Watson, 1998, p. 3). Because audiences derive contemporary archetypes from popular television series, television is an especially strong influencer of gender roles (Kellner, 1995). Gender is often confused with sex, although the two are distinct terms. While sex refers to the biological differences between male and female organisms of a species, gender refers to the socially constructed expectations of each sex within a culture (Borchers, 2006). More specifically, "gender role[s] and gender display[s] focus on behavioral aspects of being a woman or a man (as opposed … to biological differences between the two)" (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 126 – 127). For example, stereotypical gender roles that television advertising and entertainment have promoted and helped to normalize in American society over the past century (Bacue & Signorielli, 1999) include women "working full-time within the home rather than taking employment outside of [it]," and men "providing financially for the family and making important family decisions" (Blackstone, 2003, p. 337). Such stereotypes "derive from the domestic and lower status occupational roles that women more often hold; such roles involve more selflessness and concern for others than men's roles typically do" (Carli, 2010, p. 346). Gender roles such as these, which embody popular "conceptions of masculinity and … the 'normal' and 'natural' attributes and responsibilities of men [and women]" (Gross, 1995, p. 62), are indicative of hegemonic masculinity: a sociological concept

detailing "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the … legitimacy of the patriarchy [and] guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and subordination of women" (Connell, 1995, p. 77). Gender is thus not only "a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes" but also "a primary way of signifying relationships of power" (Scott, 1986, p. 1096).

As the United States has functioned as a patriarchal society since its inception (Zeskind, 2014), popular American television has always informed and reinforced hegemonic masculinity. The country's dominant hegemonic group is characterized as White, masculine and heterosexual, and "it is this profile that has monopolized" definitions of masculinity, and more broadly humanity, in mainstream television (Pieterse, 1995, p. 27). Although this trend endures today, since the dawn of the new millennium many television dramas have been more specifically "built around middle-aged male anti-heroes" (Sepinwall, 2015). In contrast to classic notions of heroism, antihero protagonists display "conduct [that] is at best morally ambiguous, questionable, and at times unjustifiable" (Janicke & Raney, 2015, p. 485). It is this particular breed of protagonist that characterizes the current Golden Age of Television, which critics and scholars generally agree commenced with *The Sopranos*, a crime drama that premiered on satellite channel HBO in January 1999 (Albrecht, 2016; Damico & Quay, 2016; Sepinwall, 2015). While television antiheroes from previous decades "were not always portrayed entirely sympathetically … by and large they were [still] on the side of good" (Speidel, 2015, p. 147). In contrast, the archetypal antiheroes of the current Golden Age are much more violent, self-absorbed, and morally ambiguous than their predecessors.

It is important to note that television scholars have applied the term "Golden Age of Television" in previous decades, specifically the 1950s (Boddy, 1993) and 1980s (Feuer, 1995), to describe periods of innovation that resulted in higher quality programming. The current

Golden Age initiated by *The Sopranos* was largely facilitated by the increased prominence of

cable and satellite networks beginning to connect with mainstream audiences in the 1980s and

1990s (Damico & Quay, 2016).[2] Because these networks are subscription based, unlike over-the-

air broadcast networks, the Federal Communication Commission does not regulate their content,

so they have fewer restrictions than broadcast networks regarding the violent and sexual subject

matter they can portray on screen (Magoun, 2007). Cable and satellite networks were therefore

free to eschew "the conventional wisdom attached to the importance of audience ratings in favor

of developing both original content and a distinct brand identity. One immediate consequence of

this approach was the increased amount of artistic freedom afforded to both writers and

directors" (Joy, 2017, p. 1), not only to incorporate more viscerally violent and sexual content in

their programs, but also to indulge in more serialized, complex narratives (Damico & Quay,

2016).

      In addition to *The Sopranos*, other eminent series of this new Golden Age include

"popular long-form U.S. dramas [such as] *The Wire* (2002 – 2008), *Mad Men* (2007 –2015), *The*

Walking Dead (2010 – 2017), [and] *Breaking Bad*" (Joy, 2017, p. 1), the latter being recognized

by *Guinness World Records* as the highest-rated television series of all time (Damico & Quay,

2016).[3] *Breaking Bad*, which aired on cable channel AMC from 2008 to 2013, follows Walt's

transformation from high school chemistry teacher to the clandestine drug manufacturer

"Heisenberg," ostensibly to support his financially struggling family. Media scholar Amanda D.

Lotz (2014) observes that this is a reoccurring element of many contemporary Golden Age

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[2] While cable television achieved prominence during this period, its origins can be traced back to
1948. Cable television, initially referred to as Community Access Television, was specifically
developed by John Walson to distribute television signals to remote, rural areas that suffered
from limited reception (Parsons, 1996). After cable television was commercialized in 1950, it
spread rapidly across the country (Parsons, 2008), signaling a massive shift within the television
industry.

[3] *Guinness World Records* cites the final season's score of 99/100 on Metacritic, an online
review aggregator.

series, as many male antihero protagonists are ostensibly "driven by motivations related to their families – a need either to provide for or to reconstitute them" (p. 63), thus fulfilling masculine social expectations as providers. Lotz and other scholars (Albrecht, 2016; Damico & Quay, 2016) attribute the ubiquity of this particular character motivation in current Golden Age programming to significant sociocultural shifts coincident with the expansion of cable and satellite programming, particularly the American masculine crisis of the 2000s:

> The male hero of the modern-day work force is no longer defined by the image of the tightly hewn worker using his body and labor to create the necessities for everyday life … As white, heterosexual, working-class and middle-class men face a life of increasing uncertainty and insecurity, they no longer have easy access to those communities in which they can inhabit a form of masculinity that defines itself in opposition to femininity. In simple terms, the new millennium offers white, heterosexual men nothing less than a life in which ennui and domestication define their everyday existence (Christensen, & Ferree, 2008, p. 8)

Several factors that challenged white hegemonic masculinity during this period were consumerism, economic depression, terrorism, and the increased visibility of feminism and minority right's movements, as "gains by women and minorities … are often felt as losses by [White] men" (Raeburn, 2016, p. 49). Prestige television of the new millennium has been recognized as reflecting this "growing sense of 'white masculinity in crisis'" (Wayne, 2014, p. 206), with series such as *Breaking Bad*, *Mad Men*, *Rescue Me*, *The Sopranos*, and *Sons of Anarchy* enjoying popular and critical success by ruminating on this cultural zeitgeist. Relatedly, it is precisely this zeitgeist that Trump capitalized on during the last presidential election to achieve political victory:

Trump supporters were more likely to believe men are discriminated against and that

society has become "too soft and feminine." For voters who feel men's status is

declining, social scientists and popular commentators speculated [Trump] served as a

powerful symbol for their desire to return to a more gender-conventional society in which

masculinity is publicly considered higher status than femininity (Carian & Sobotka,

2018).

As a theorist and critical scholar of televised rhetoric and discourses, I am interested in analyzing

such programming to determine whether these prestige antihero series invited viewers to

contribute to the current masculinist movement under Trump and reassert dominance in response

to perceived losses to women and minority groups.

Historically, television dramas have aligned character values with the political zeitgeist of

the era. In the late 1950s, "television networks were motivated to carefully consider their public

service obligations [due to] cold war politics" (Collins, 2015, p. 97), and thus featured characters

with strong moral values that functioned as foils to McCarthyism. Popular television characters

of the 1960s embodied Democratic president John F. Kennedy's ethos of education, patriotism,

and public service (Watson, 1990). In the 1980s, the most successful dramas were those that

featured more traditionally masculine protagonists (Lotz, 2014), reflecting the popularity of

Republican president Ronald Reagan, who intentionally projected an image of macho strength

(Watson, 2007). Because popular television drama often reflects contemporary political culture,

it is interesting to identify recurring motifs and themes of popular series that aired prior to or are

airing during Trump's presidency and determine how they reflect the American sociocultural

zeitgeist leading up to and under his leadership.

Although the White House has historically served "as a safe space for white masculinity"

(Johnson, 2017, p. 17), it was unable to serve this role for many White, working class Americans

from 2008 through 2016 due to the presidency of Barack Obama, a Democrat and the country's

first Black president. In the United States and "many [other] Western nations, the ideal leader is

[viewed as] white" (Holmes, 2017, p. 15). Many of these Americans, possessing narrow views of

representative democratic government, resultantly argued that Obama was unsuited to lead and

protect the United States, criticisms that were often heavily rooted in Obama's race (Enck-

Wanzer, 2011). Similarly, the Democratic Party's nominee for his successor, Hillary Clinton

(2017), stated that she continually struggled against misogynistic and sexist attitudes and attacks

during her presidential campaign, which she argued contributed to her defeat.[4] Many viewed the

election of Trump, Clinton's Republican opponent and an older White man, as a return to the

previous status quo, with the White House reestablished as "the ultimate site of [nationalized]

white masculinity," a location "where whiteness, masculinity, and nationhood are fused"

(Shome, 2000, p. 369).

Trump's campaign rhetoric catered to older White Americans apprehensive towards the

country's increasing racial diversity, which within the next four decades will result in their loss

as the majority population group (Zeskind, 2014). Obama, being the country's first Black

president, was the ultimate physical embodiment of this trend and purported loss of privilege.

Trump thus managed to tap into and exploit the White masculine crisis that prestige television of

the new millennium reflected and possibly exacerbated, fueling beliefs of masculine

marginalization and entitlement. Robin Lakoff (2017) explains that Trump projected an

exaggerated model of masculinity defined by power, machismo, and defiance, which proved

popular among his supporters. Both Trump and his voter base have been criticized as bigoted,

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[4] I want to make clear that I am not endorsing Clinton, nor suggesting that she was immune to
criticism. However, a considerable amount of the vitriol directed towards her *was* solely based
on her sex.

misogynistic, and prejudiced. Trump campaigned on nostalgia to "Make America Great Again!" However, as stated by Lakoff:

> America's most recent Golden Age was located [before] all the disturbances of the '60s, when the laws changed to allow others than white males entrée into all the good things America had to offer: education, jobs, power, status … To Make America Great Again, the results of the Civil Rights and Women's Movements had to be undone (p. 602).

To his supporters, Trump's inauguration as president of the United States reaffirmed White hegemonic masculinity in American society, prevailing over women and marginalized racial masculinities. Issues of race, sex, culture, and entertainment all intersect in analysis of the current sociopolitical climate heralded by Trump's election.

For this research I will explore and analyze selected episodes of popular antihero-centered television dramas that appear to invite White male demographics to view the programs through preferred readings that endorse White masculine supremacy. My research will demonstrate that such series have operated as textual artifacts that contributed to forming the zeitgeist of the masculinized cultural moment which Trump serves as a figurehead of. Such research is relevant to modern American political and social discourse, thus providing a rich opportunity to expand on preexisting research into televisual influence on masculinity within a fresh context.

Rationale for Study

Journalist Paul Raeburn (2016) states that "American politics provides a near-perfect arena for clashes of masculinity" (p. 49). Throughout his presidential campaign, Trump especially wanted "to be and to seem a macho man [and] a Super-Male" (Lakoff, 2017, p. 598). Not only did his rhetoric in interviews and debates conform to aggressive abrasive norms, but also heavily racialized, with Trump often making sweeping generalizations regarding various

ethnicities and minorities (Haberman, 2015; Parnass, 2015). Numerous sexual assault allegations were also levied against Trump (Graves & Morris, 2017), many of which were not highly publicized until a video was released of Trump bragging about how his fame and wealth allowed him to "grab [women] by the pussy" without consent (Raeburn, 2016). Despite his scandals, controversial rhetoric, and general lack of political experience (instead being known for his business career and appearances on reality television), Trump's approval numbers among White, evangelical blue-collar conservatives nevertheless eclipsed those of other Republican candidates. Lakoff (2017) asserts that this particular social group didn't vote for Trump "*despite* his vile behaviors and utterances, but *because* of them" (p. 602). Lakoff's sentiment is shared by conservative commentator Andrea Tantaros, who suggests this social group believed Trump's election represented an opportunity to symbolically "get their masculinity back" (French, 2016, p. 19) after what they perceived to be masculine losses over the past decade:

> The historical confluence of feminist and multicultural challenges to white male supremacy and neoliberal transformations of everyday practices of governance, labor, identity, and citizenship have undermined the privileges and economic assumptions associated with normative white masculinity (Sugg, 2015, p. 796).

This project posits cultural connections and shared demographics between Trump's voter base and viewers of popular antihero dramas such as *Breaking Bad*. While older White male viewers could relate with the sense of displacement experienced by Walter White and similar antihero protagonists, did these series also invite or promote feelings presuming racial superiority that fueled Trump's popular support?

There is certainly overlap in the audience demographics for such hypermasculine series and Trump's voter base. For example, Trump's campaign specifically catered to voters of *The Walking Dead*, a post-apocalyptic drama that premiered in 2011. Airing on AMC alongside

Breaking Bad, *The Walking Dead* centers on a zombie apocalypse. Trump's campaign identified "shows popular with specific voter blocks in specific regions," with *The Walking Dead* being popular among conservatives concerned about immigration, and campaigns ads tailored accordingly (Bertoni, 2016, para. 24). There is precedence for the popularity of zombie fiction among conservative audiences, as zombie texts commonly apply the creatures as metaphors for "predominant cultural anxieties" (Bishop, 2010, p. 26) such as feminism, immigration, and similar liberal causes "that challenge the validity of [White] male privilege" (Wayne, 2014, p. 206). Ultimately, through application of critical race theory and intersectionality, this project identifies textual elements of *Breaking Bad* and *The Walking Dead* relating to toxic masculinity that were misinterpreted and embraced by certain audiences and link such phenomena to ongoing sociopolitical trends in the United States, particularly the destigmatization of misogyny and White supremacy in the American political sphere.

Literature Review on Cultural Mirroring in Popular Television

It is difficult to separate trends in television from those of American politics, as televisual history and political history are closely intertwined. After television emerged as the dominant American medium in the 1950s, popular series have both reflected and informed sociopolitical progression. In the early 1960s, during the denouement of the initial Golden Age of Television, the popularity of President Kennedy was reflected in contemporary television programs. Such references included "fifty-mile hikes, touch football, pill box hats, and Boston accents" (Watson, 1990, p. 54), all personal interests and characteristics of the president that came to be viewed as attractive masculine qualities, thus informing hegemonic masculinity during the period. Besides Kennedy's affable personality, he was also favorably viewed for his status as the country's first (and as of the time of writing only) Roman Catholic president, with his election being regarded as a watershed cultural moment in the breaking of social barriers (Casey, 2009). Social

progression became a prominent feature of Kennedy's presidency, with his liberal political

leanings also informing 1960s primetime television. Prior to Kennedy's presidency, minority

characters were rarely featured on screen, and the few portrayals they did enjoy were often

highly caricatured stereotypes, stereotypes being "cognitive shortcuts that influence the way

people process information regarding groups and group members" (Northouse, 2013, p. 358),

often to detrimental effect. After Kennedy addressed the Civil Rights Movement in his 1963

presidential address, many primetime series correspondingly expanded minority representation

and even began to address themes of prejudice and discrimination.

Television scholar Mary Ann Watson (1990) suggests that *The Dick Van Dyke Show*,

which aired on CBS from 1961 to 1966, captured the zeitgeist of Kennedy's presidency more so

than any of its contemporaries. Although television during "the Kennedy years was [more]

modern, more immediate and sophisticated, sharper than TV" from previous decades (p. 17), *The

Dick Van Dyke Show* especially was recognized as exhibiting more complex writing and

embodying "the new erudite, college-educated generation of young suburban adults as

personified by President John F. Kennedy" (Gitlin, 2014, p. 69). *The Dick Van Dyke Show*

starred comedian Dick Van Dyke as Rob Petrie, a comedy writer in Manhattan. As with other

television dads of the era, Petrie was financially sufficient and family-oriented, and enjoyed

spending time with his wife and son, thus promoting family values. Even contemporary

reviewers recognized and appreciated the prevalence of family-oriented fathers in such series

(Oren, 2003). Today, *The Dick Van Dyke Show* is widely regarded as a classic and landmark

television text (Brooks & Marsh, 2007; Gitlin, 2014), and the series' celebratory portrayal of the

middle class is recognized as reflecting American optimism during the 1960s (Watson, 1990).

Unfortunately, the widespread optimism of the early 1960s would gradually erode as the

decade progressed, beginning with Kennedy's assassination by ex-Marine Lee Harvey Oswald in

November 1963. Further debilitating influences on American nationalism in the 1960s included "the murders of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy,[5] just weeks apart in the spring of 1968" (Watson, 1998, p. 88), as well as intervention in the Vietnam War would continue to darken the American social atmosphere, with the United States deploying regular combat units to the country beginning in 1965. Although moral fortitude had historically been considered a characteristic of American exceptionalism, this perception would be challenged by numerous war crimes committed by American soldiers, arguably the most infamous example being the 1968 Mỹ Lai Massacre, the mass murder of several hundred Vietnamese civilians, including women and children. When the massacre was revealed to the public in 1969, it obliterated inherent assumptions of American martial virtue. Although Mỹ Lai was "certainly not the first massacre or shameful event in [American] martial history, it could no longer be ignored or supported by other elements of providential destiny" (Linenthal, 1980, p. 87). As a result, the country's national character was far darker entering the 1970s.

In addition to the Vietnam War, which would not conclude until 1975, another negative influence on the country's national character during this new decade was the 1973 oil crisis, which resulted from an oil embargo initiated by the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). The embargo marked the first time in American history that the country's economic welfare was largely dependent on a foreign power, thus challenging notions of American prowess and vitality, and by extension, American masculinity. The oil crisis and concurrent stock market crash triggered a new economic recession in the country, characterized by both high unemployment and price inflation (Watson, 1998). The collective effects of these national struggles took their toll on the American psyche, with the economic recession being especially debilitating for blue-collar Americans (Cowie, 2014). Masculine psychic trauma was

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[5] A popular New York senator and the younger brother of President Kennedy.

conveyed in 1970s popular media, with culturally significant films such as *Dog Day Afternoon* and *Taxi Driver* featuring angry, emasculated antihero protagonists unsure of their place in society and the legacy of the Vietnam War (Watson, 1998). On television, *All in the Family*'s Archie Bunker best represented this masculine angst. Despite his bigoted and racist views, the financial struggles Bunker faced as the patriarch of a working-class family endeared him to some audiences (Cowie, 2014), and much of *All in the Family*'s massive success during its run is attributed to the character (Brooks & Marsh, 2007). Additionally, because the majority of member nations were primarily Arab, Arabs were vilified in popular television, and it became a common story trope in crime dramas for Arab men to kidnap young White women and sell them into sexual slavery (Watson, 1998).

The reason the Vietnam War and economic depression of the 1970s were so debilitating to masculinity is that "that the culture and ideology of hegemonic masculinity go hand in hand with the culture and ideology of hegemonic nationalism" (Nagel, 1998, p. 249), as men predominate the majority of American state institutions. Following the conclusion of the war:

> The status [America] attained in World War II as the proud leader of the free world had been badly tarnished in the debacle of Vietnam; with assassinations, civil unrest, political scandals and a troubled economy on the home front, Americans were forced to re-evaluate their self image as the most virtuous and blessed people on earth (Hurup, 1996, p. 181).

Nevertheless, the 1980s would produce a political and masculine resurgence under Ronald Reagan. Prior to his career in politics, Reagan was an actor, with his filmography including several western films. As an actor, corporate spokesperson, and a politician, Reagan projected the image of the American cowboy, a celebrated form of hegemonic masculinity characterized as a "man of action, grim, lean, of few topics and not too many words" (Kimmel 1996, p. 149).

Scholar Nick Trujillo (1991) identifies "working class values" (p. 291) as another characteristic of the cowboy archetype. An American icon tied to the national mythology of the country's founding, "the American cowboy represents both the power of 'civilization' against the 'savage' and 'outlaw' forces of disorder and the more 'raw' and 'untamed' American West against the 'effete,' urban and over-refined East" (Christensen & Ferree, 2008, p. 288). The cowboy dispenses justice based on his own personal code, and thus functions as a maverick or renegade lawman. Even though his methods may violate the law or human rights, the cowboy's actions are always in service of the greater good, which in western fiction is commonly presented as the protection of White communities vulnerable to external, Othered forces.

Reagan's own embodiment of classic cowboy masculinity consequently influenced the presentation of masculinity in 1980s popular culture, as films and television of the decade explored themes of remasculinization and self-identity, helping to "heal the national wound of Vietnam" (Watson, 2007, p. 4). Violent and hypermasculine war films such as *Uncommon Valor*, *Missing in Action*, and *Rambo: First Blood Part II* portrayed a revisionist history of the Vietnam War, symbolically redeeming the United States after its defeat in the conflict. On television, dramas "featuring more [traditional] patriarchal masculinities," such as *Dallas*, enjoyed far greater ratings success than series featuring newer, alternative masculinities that emphasized emotion and sensitivity (Lotz, 2014, p. 46). *Dallas*, a soap opera that aired on network channel CBS, is recognized as one of the most popular series to ever air on primetime television (Brooks & Marsh, 2007). *Dallas* is centered on J. R. Ewing, a wealthy oil baron. A native Texan, J. R. similarly embodied cowboy masculinity and was known for his signature cowboy hat, ruthless business acumen, and sexual prowess. J. R. and Reagan are both widely regarded as eminent masculine icons of the 1980s, being recognized as "men who show open disregard for government legislation and legal decisions and favor images of strength and firmness with an

independence that [represent] a separate culture based on the mythos of masculinity" (Jeffords, 1989, p. 169).

Reagan ultimately contributed to the remasculinization of the United States during his presidency, due to his cultural associations with war heroes and cowboys, both archetypes of glorified masculinity, and his political position of military strength during the Cold War. Nevertheless, American masculinity would again be threatened on September 11, 2001, when Islamist fringe terrorist organization al-Qaeda launched a coordinated series of attacks on American landmarks and killed nearly 3,000 American civilians. The September 11 attacks – now commonly abbreviated as "9/11" –subsequently served as the impetus for the United States to initiate the War on Terror overseas. The attacks resulted in "a drastic and seismic shift in the national mythologies of America and Americans – what was once invulnerable, safe, and powerful was now broken, damaged, and traumatized" (Horton, 2016, p. 74). Like the Vietnam War before it, 9/11 specifically "link[ed] the crisis of a nation with the crisis of manhood" (Jeffords, 1994, p. 12).

During the War on Terror, Republican President George W. Bush, being a native Texan, was portrayed by news media as a "quintessentially American cowboy" (Christensen & Ferree, 2008, p. 288), projecting a reassuring image of strength to the country, and his approval ratings reached record highs. The attacks also exerted a profound influence on contemporary entertainment media. Because 9/11 reshaped American masculinity "as the subject of ongoing trauma, violence, and loss" (Achter, 2016, p. 82), a considerable number of television texts began to explore themes of loss and vulnerability, specifically from the perspective of violent men. Just as Bush projected cowboy masculinity on the news, the prominence of antihero protagonists represented a revival of maverick cowboy masculinity in entertainment television. One was such character was Vic Mackey, the protagonist of *The Shield*, a police drama that aired

on cable channel FX. *The Shield* premiered in 2002, only six months after the 9/11 attacks, and is regarded as an early text of television's modern Golden Age (Sepinwall, 2015). Vic, a corrupt LAPD detective, routinely engages in extortion, money laundering, and even murder. Contrastingly, Vic is simultaneously portrayed as a loving, dedicated father to his three children, two who are autistic and require private schooling, thus allowing him to retain audiences' sympathy.[6] *The Shield* has been referred to as an allegory for 9/11 (Damico & Quay, 2016; Poniewozik, 2008), with writer Nicholas Ray (2012) suggesting audiences' willingness to overlook Vic's numerous crimes and focus on his positive attributes "reflects their collective desire for domestic security [following 9/11], regardless of the moral cost" (p. 185).

Besides 9/11, another debilitating influence on American masculinity was the 2008 financial crisis, which resulted in the Great Recession, mirroring the economic recession of the 1970s. Economists informally referred to the Great Recession as the "hecession," as 80% of the American jobs lost during this period were those held by men. Because economic success and providing for one's family are popularly viewed as masculine traits, the economic decline of the United States served to further emasculate and challenge traditional notions of masculinity (Albrecht, 2016; Kimmel, 2013). Subsequently, *Breaking Bad* and other antihero-centered dramas that premiered following the Great Recession emphasized financial difficulty as the driving impetus for their protagonists to enter a life of crime. A common motivation for such protagonists was to fulfill both their paternal and patriarchal duties by maintaining their status as economic providers:

> [The 2008 financial crisis] takes on an additional significance given the presumed linkage
>
> of white masculinity and economic capacity. The crash posed a catastrophic threat to

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[6] Vic's vacillation between masculine and feminine actions in *The Shield* is also evident in Walt's similarly gendered vacillations in *Breaking Bad*. At the beginning of the series, Walt is a high school teacher, a profession largely occupied by women, and enters the violent, hypermasculine arena that is the drug trade ostensibly to support his family posthumously.

social and political presumptions of white masculinity's competence by interrupting the

metonymic relationship between whiteness and economic acumen (Johnson, 2017, p. 17).

Ultimately, the difficult socioeconomic atmosphere of the 2000s and 2010s closely

mirrors that of the 1970s, due to similar overseas conflicts and economic difficulties that

challenge notions of American masculinity and vitality. Reagan contributed to the

remasculinization of the United States after the 1970s (Watson, 2007), and Trump's supporters

believe he can do the same. In many ways, the White discontents of the Obama era fueled

Trump's rise. Resentment about being governed by an African American seemed to function like

adding oxygen to the simmering fires of American racial hatred dating to the 1950s and 1960s

civil rights movements. Trump appealed to this racial hatred of Obama, which he signaled with

his "birther" campaign for many years. The raw appeals to racism increased membership in hate

groups during the 2016 presidential campaign (Sanchez, 2018).

Throughout his campaign, Trump repeatedly compared himself to Reagan and attempted

to emulate the popular cowboy masculinity he embodied (Richardson, 2015). While this

particular model of masculinity is ubiquitous among antihero dramas of the current Golden Age,

scholars observe that *The Shield* and similar texts suggest men "need to be rescued from … the

impossible standards of heroism enshrined as a masculine ideal in the wake of 9/11" (Takacs,

2014, p. 167), and that cowboy masculinity is an outdated concept unsuited to modern day

context (Faludi, 2007).[7] These scholars also acknowledge that some audiences may have

misinterpreted series such as *The Shield* as endorsing such masculine models instead of

denouncing them (Takacs, 2014). Notably, many viewers went to unexpected lengths to defend

and rationalize the most toxic actions of these series' protagonists (Sepinwall, 2015). Similarly,

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[7] While the cowboy has historically been presented as embodying shared community justice, modern usage of the cowboy emphasizes his violent capability against unknown individuals whom aspects of the population deem threats, specifically "Others" such as immigrants.

many of Trump's supporters defend even his most egregious and controversial statements, which

some political commentators have likened to Archie Bunker's prejudiced rhetoric from the 1970s

(Stiehm, 2017). Even Norman Lear, the producer of *All in the Family*, noted that blue-collar

viewers who identified with Bunker's bigotry and feelings of marginalization would similarly

identify with Trump (Hensch, 2016). Just as the current Golden Age of Television emphasized

the experiences of older White men, Trump's presidency caters almost exclusively to this same

social group whilst marginalizing the voices of both women and people of color. As I will

demonstrate through my chosen case studies, the trend of White antihero protagonists in modern

prestige television and Trump's ascension in the country's highest office reflect the same

masculinist zeitgeist.

Case Studies: *Breaking Bad* and *The Walking Dead*

The specific episodes that will serve as case studies for this research into the relationship

between contemporary antihero entertainment and the cultural zeitgeist of Trump's America will

be drawn from two series in particular: *Breaking Bad* and *The Walking Dead*. Both series are

regarded as eminent texts in the current Golden Age of Television and center on White, violent

antihero protagonists. *Breaking Bad*'s protagonist embodies feelings of White exceptionalism

juxtaposed against White marginalization during the new millennium. The protagonists of *The*

Walking Dead are likened to modern-day cowboys, an explicitly racialized and gendered

archetype (Trujillo, 1991). Additionally, the White hegemony[8] in both series affects other

characters in their ensembles that do not share the social privilege associated with White

masculinity. For example, a reoccurring criticism of contemporary Golden Age dramas such as

Breaking Bad and *The Walking Dead* is that they "operate within, and contribute to, a

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[8] Hegemony is defined as the power exhibited by dominant social groups, which can even be integrated into a society's laws and norms (Gramsci, 1971). The assertion of hegemonic power is not always apparent and can be expressed through micro actions normalized in society (Essed, 1991).

problematic cultural setting that frequently marginalizes narratives of [gender] abuse at the expense of an overwhelming emphasis on the complexities of hegemonic masculinity" (Joy, 2017, p. 1). In *Breaking Bad*, Walt's actions yield devastating consequences on his wife Skyler, who nevertheless endures the brunt of explicitly misogynist condemnation on social media (Gunn, 2013; Joy, 2017); in the earliest seasons of *The Walking Dead*, women are portrayed as physically incapable of defending themselves and restricted to stereotypical domestic duties, such as washing laundry and watching children (Steiger, 2011; Sugg, 2015).

Both series also display problematic racial coding. In *Breaking Bad*, Walt murders a considerable number of Latino Americans as he integrates himself into Albuquerque's drug trade, only a few of whom are developed significantly as characters. Additionally, despite his exceedingly unconventional background, Walt is portrayed as superior to these criminals in his production and distribution of methamphetamine. This serves to subliminally reinforce notions of White exceptionalism and superiority. In contrast, the sole Black character in *The Walking Dead*'s early ensemble is noticeably marginalized, often going entire episodes without dialogue (Kine, 2011; Rawlings, 2011). While later seasons of *The Walking Dead* display greater racial diversity, any authority or agency exhibited by women and racial minorities in the series is primarily determinant upon the discretion of its White male protagonist, Rick Grimes.

There are several unique scholastic reasons in selecting episodes from *Breaking Bad* and *The Walking Dead* as the primary case studies for this project. Although both series marginalize the voices of women and minorities in favor of White men, *Breaking Bad*'s considerable critical acclaim lends the series a sense of artistic legitimacy to its themes. *Breaking Bad* also aired from 2008 to 2013, the era of the Great Recession, and has been lauded by television critics and scholars as capturing "the social and economic struggles of … middle and working class America" during this time period (Pierson, 2014, p. 11), struggles that influenced their voting

decisions in 2016. Conservative commentators also recognized that *Breaking Bad* was "relatively popular in red-state America" (Goldberg, 2013).

While *The Walking Dead* does not share *Breaking Bad*'s acclaim, it has the highest overall viewership of any cable series in television history, being the sole non-sports broadcast "to crack the top 50 most-watched basic-cable programs of all time" (Rice, 2013, p. 26). Due to its incredible commercial success, *The Walking Dead* thus enjoys strong cultural resonance in American society:

> Viewers organize watch-parties, buy an assortment of *Walking Dead* stuff from its website, play downloadable games and apps that zombify photos of family and friends, and keep apace of the show's minutia online through chats and contests to appear on *The Walking Dead* (Watts, 2017, p. 8).

The Walking Dead is especially popular in rural and conservative households (Katz, 2016), communities that largely swayed towards Trump during the election. Therefore, the significant visibility that *Breaking Bad* and *The Walking Dead* enjoy in the current television landscape imbues both series with considerable potential for cultural research. Additionally, both series aired on AMC. The majority of Americans between ages 45 and 64 voted for Trump in the last election (Castillo, 2016), and the median age of viewers for AMC is 49.5 years old (Consoli, 2012), thus providing another advantage to analyzing *Breaking Bad* and *The Walking Dead*, both of which are regarded as flagship series for the channel.

In summary, the ultimate goal of this research is to align popular hypermasculine television dramas with the 2016 presidential election to posit that there is a correspondence, based on overlaps and symbolic parallels between protagonists in *Breaking Bad* and *The Walking Dead* as icons of pop culture, with the establishment of Donald Trump, a bona fide television star, as the head of American political culture. Because television media can often relate,

illustrate, and depict the zeitgeist of an era, how does antihero entertainment such as *Breaking Bad* and *The Walking Dead* convey the zeitgeist of Trump's presidency, and what do they suggest about the direction of American society?

CHAPTER 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY: INTERSECTIONAL

AND CRITICAL RACE THEORY APPLIED TO VISUAL TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF

POPULAR TELEVISION TEXTS

Introduction

Because the current "Golden Age of Television" emphasizes the experiences of White

men while minimizing minority perspectives (Damico & Quay, 2016; Sepinwall, 2015), it is

necessary for this research project to incorporate a theoretical framework that will provide a

more nuanced and sensitive reading of marginalized communities. To do so, I will employ

specific theories that will account for how the hegemony of White male protagonists in *Breaking*

Bad and *The Walking Dead*, as well as the reciprocal effects of their actions, affect alternatively

gendered or racialized characters in their respective social systems. Although this research

examines specific episodes as representative of these issues in two series centered on White

antihero protagonists for its case studies, it also aims to decenter hegemonic masculinity and

instead emphasize these marginalized characters. The two most applicable theories to accomplish

these specific research goals are intersectionality and critical race theory. Scholars harness

intersectionality to examine overlapping social identities and multidimensional oppression

(Crenshaw, 1989), and critical race theory to examine to the relationship between race and

hegemonic power (Crenshaw, 1995, p. xiii; Wing, 2016). Both theories examine race and racism,

although critical race theory builds upon intersectionality in several unique ways. Together, these

theories will establish a framework that will acknowledge the intersection of race and power in

popular Golden Age programs.

For my method, I employ a textual analysis informed by rhetorical scholarship on visual

communication, defined as visual rhetoric. Visual rhetoric connects two distinct terms, both with

distinct definitions:

Visual implies the cultural practices of seeing and looking, as well as the artifacts

produced in diverse communicative forms and media. Visual media, images, and pictorial

messages permeate the culture. We associate them with aesthetic expressions and

pleasure, emotional response, and both fine art and popular culture … In contrast, by

definition, rhetoric as practice and theory concerns persuasive symbolic actions primarily.

Rhetoric seeks and creates public audiences through symbolic identifications situated in

specific historical times, places, and contexts (Finnegan, Hope & Olson, 2008, p. 3).

Furthermore, this textual analysis is guided by critical discourse analysis and visual culture

studies. Critical discourse analysis is a form of analytical research used to identify and study the

social implications of discourse, with the ultimate goal of solving these "social problems [by]

taking the perspective of those who suffer from the inequalities in society" (Ansari,

Asadollahzadeh & Sharifi, 2016, p. 51). Dissimilar to other analytical techniques, critical

discourse analysis "focuses on rhetoric and the structure of words, phrases and grammar.

Analyzing these functions of rhetoric in films, shows and/or speeches can help reveal hidden

messages and [the] intentions of authors, artists, actors or politicians who produced the rhetoric"

(Matusitz & Pafford, 2017, p. 276). Originally developed in the 1980s "as a programmatic

development in European discourse studies … it has [since] become one of the most influential

and visible branches of discourse analysis (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000, p. 447).

Contrastingly, visual culture studies relate to the study of contemporary culture,

particularly how public audiences seek meaning through visual technology and media such as

television (Mirzoeff, 1999). Visual media encompasses any form of communication received

partially or entirely through vision, including but not limited to "photography, film, posters,

cartoons, emblems, advertisements, illustrations, [and] television" (Finnegan, Hope & Olson,

2008, p. 3). Television, being an especially visual medium (Griffin, 2001), is "highly dependent

on engaging [images]" (Schmuhl, 1990, p. 87). Visual images are recognized as the dominant

form of communicating and teaching information (Barry, 2005), as "the language of images

quickly and memorably communicates impressions to viewers in a fashion that is easily

understood" (Schill, 2012, p. 121). Research indicates that images in motion especially are more

engaging and "create more emotional arousal than still images" (p. 127), as they can

communicate a wide variety of emotions in a small period of time (Plutchik, 1980).

Communication scholar Paul Messaris suggests that some specific ways individuals portrayed in

visual images provoke emotion from viewers include "camera angle[s], a look of superiority,

identification, and sexual appearances" (Borchers, 2006, p. 275). Resultantly, visual images from

motion pictures, a blanket term that includes "movies, television programs and commercial and

political advertising, are enormously powerful influences on [personal] attitudes and beliefs"

(Blair, 1996, p. 23), and thus provide a foundational role for viewers to develop their sense of

self (Damasio, 1999).

     Although television and similarly visual media forms are recognized as "sites of public

pedagogy [where] beliefs, knowledges, politics, and subjectivities [are established]" (Hladki,

2009, p. 109), television narratives never communicate one singular meaning. Instead, because

visual communication is semiotic, meaning that it is a process largely based on signs and

symbols (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Lester, 2011), audiences can derive a plurality of

different meanings from the same television text (Haarman & Piazza, 2016), due to their own

cultural perspectives towards its signs and/or symbols (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). French

semiologist Roland Barthes, one of the earliest scholars to study visual images, suggested that

visual imagery could contain "connotative meaning[s]. That is, they can … conjure cultural

images for the viewer (Borchers, 2006, p. 271). In recognition of such phenomena, scholar Jason

Tham (2017) asserts that scholars of visual rhetoric "should evaluate … cultural significance

when studying visuals" (p. 36). Therefore, textual analysis can be applied to episodes of *Breaking Bad* and *The Walking Dead* and used to identify elements of both series that audiences could have interpreted as promoting White supremacy and other toxic ideologies, even when the producers or writers did not intend such messages.

Theoretical Framework

Intersectionality

Intersectionality was pioneered by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw (1989) and further developed by sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (2000). Crenshaw (1989) was dissatisfied with "the tendency to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experiences and analysis" (p. 139). Crenshaw argues that when multiple identities intersect, they produce a hybrid identity distinct from its individual components. As defined by Crenshaw, intersectionality assumes that prejudicial beliefs, such as racism and sexism, could be interrelated, rather than acting independently. As an example, Crenshaw explains that "in race discrimination cases, discrimination tends to be viewed in terms of sex- or class- privileged blacks; in sex discriminations cases, the focus is on race- and class-privileged women" (p. 140). Resultantly, individuals who belong to multiple marginalized identities, such as Black women, are obscured completely. Although Black women can experience racial discrimination similar to Black men or sexual discrimination similar to White women, Black women often "experience double discrimination – the combined effects of practices which discriminate on the basis of race, and on the basis of sex" (p. 149). As Crenshaw (1991) explains, a key strength of intersectionality is that it addresses a critical weakness of identity politics, which is a tendency to "frequently [conflate] or [ignore] intragroup differences" (p. 1242).

Although Crenshaw's work largely addresses feminist discourse regarding sexual assault cases of Black women (1989, 1991), intersectionality has grown in popularity and been applied

to a variety of research studies. Intersectionality is an especially strong theory with which "to explore the dynamics of having privilege in one sphere but being unprivileged in another arena" (Coston & Kimmel, 2012, p. 98). For example, scholars have applied intersectionality to studies of White privilege, both as it exists in society and is portrayed in popular media. Such privilege has been presented as an "open and sharable [space], due to the believed existence of social parity," and the notion "that all humans are alike regardless of sociopolitical position or access" (Jackson, 1999, p. 48). However, intersectionality disproves this notion. Although Whites, being the majority population and often culturally dominant societal group in the United States, are more likely to gain access to social privilege than other races, some may still be denied access to this privilege based on other categories of identity. For example, the perspectives of White women have been historically ignored and trivialized within electronic media "due to a variety of factors, including women's relatively low status and marginalization within society" (Etter-Lewis, 1996, p. 8). This is less a product of neglect than a conscious attempt at suppression, as masculinity is "fundamentally anxious" (Cooper, 2012, p. 101). Nevertheless, even though White masculinities as a collective enjoy the greatest access to societal privilege, certain models of White masculinity are less privileged due to other categories of identification:

> The dynamics of removing privilege involve assumptions of emasculation – exclusion from that category that would confer privilege. Gender is the mechanism by which the marginalized are marginalized. That is, gay, working class, or disabled men are seen as "not-men" in the popular discourse of their marginalization. It is their masculinity – the site of privilege – that is specifically targeted as the grounds for exclusion from privilege. Thus, though men, they often see themselves as reaping few, if any, of the benefits of their privileged status as [white] men (Coston & Kimmel, 2012, p. 98).

Such application of intersectionality is especially relevant to research into the relationship

between contemporary Golden Age dramas and Trump's presidential campaign, as many of

Trump's lower-class voters were persuaded to vote for him due to the belief that White

masculinity as a whole was being embattled in society (Aytaç, Rau & Stokes, 2016). While this

particular social group is only partially disadvantaged due to their lower-class status, they are not

disadvantaged in terms of race, owing to the established racial privilege afforded to Whiteness in

the United States.

Critical Race Theory

The purpose of critical race theory is to assess and critique the relationship between race

and hegemonic power, especially in terms of racial domination (Wing, 2016). It is observed that

"much of the theorizing of race and its modern development in Europe and the United States

centers on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and … aesthetic inquiries into the nature of the

human species" (Watts, 2017, p. 3), although these works generally present Whiteness as

aesthetically and intellectually superior to other races. When taking such prejudicial foundations

into consideration, critical race theory argues that "race and racism implicitly and explicitly

impact[s] social structures, practices and discourses [in the United States]" (Yosso, 2005, p. 70),

and is used to examine such phenomena. As with intersectionality, Crenshaw is also recognized

as a key contributor to the development of critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). In

addition, critical race theory builds on intersectionality in several important ways. Although

critical race theory, like intersectionality, examines race and racism, "these constructs also are

viewed at their intersection with other forms of oppression such as by sexual orientation, class,

or gender" (Bi Lin, Cappiccie, Chadha & Snyder, 2012, p. 47).

While critical race theory was initially developed by American legal scholars "to develop

a jurisprudence that accounts for the role of racism in American law" (Matsuda, 1991, p. 1331),

the theory is not restricted to legal studies and can be used to observe "the ways in which race

and racial power are constructed and represented in . . . American society as a whole"

(Crenshaw, 1995, p. xiii). The interdisciplinarity of critical race theory is one of its key strengths,

and the theory is represented in fields as wide and diverse as cultural studies, literary studies,

queer studies and women's studies. Quite simply, critical race theory can be applied to any study

that features race as a prominent factor (Raengo, 2016) and is related to social justice (Bi Lin,

Cappiccie, Chadha & Snyder, 2012). In addition to Crenshaw, established scholars famous for

their use of critical race theory include Derrick Bell, Richard Delgado, Neil Gotanda, Thomas

Kendall and Jean Stefancic (Raengo, 2016).

Critical race theory is often employed to analyze the construction of Whiteness, and its

implications towards individuals of color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Whiteness is a culturally

produced rhetorical construction that affirms White hegemony (Krizek & Nakayama, 1995).

Although the specific parameters of Whiteness are contested, it is generally agreed to be "a

historically contingent and socially constructed racial category, once defined to be sure, by

privilege and power" (Rodriguez, 1999, p. 21). It is suggested that "white people have a peculiar

relationship to race" (Dyer, 1997, p. 18), with some scholars arguing that Whiteness is not a

racial or ethnic identity, instead serving as a "political classification" (Frye, 1983, p. 118). While

Whiteness "is theorized as being racial, [it] is typically represented as non-racial. It is invested in

a particular subject position (supremacy), but obfuscates that position in the name of

universality" (Watts, 2005, p. 190), thus allowing White individuals to maintain a "label-free

existence" (Krizek & Nakayama, 1995, p. 301). Because Whiteness functions as the societal

norm in the United States, deviance from this identity can be easily Othered to establish

"boundaries of racial geography [and] rights, imitations, and privileges" (Watts, 2005, p. 190).

Therefore, Whiteness is an attractive research opportunity to scholars who insist that "the

cultural privileges ascribed to white people must be understood before an understanding of the

conditions of minorities can be gained" (Rodriguez, 1999, p. 20). Such research is ever

expanding; rather than being fixed, Whiteness "changes over time and space and is in no way a

transhistorical essence" (Frankenberg, 1993, p. 236). Instead, Whiteness is fluid, evolving

alongside society to maintain its social dominance.

A key reason "whiteness as a racial position is able to maintain a sense of centrality in

contemporary American racial politics [is] because it remains largely invisible and unspoken"

(Chidester, 2008, p. 158). This invisibility is even present in academia, as "conventional

approaches to the study of 'race' in America tend to ignore 'whiteness' by treating it simply as a

given, and even as a benign factor in 'race' relations" (Guess, 2006, p. 651). Therefore, "the

invisibility of whiteness [is] manifested through its universality" (Krizek & Nakayama, 1995, p.

293), which speaks to the "paradoxical nature of whiteness itself. Whiteness desires to be seen as

object, yet insists on remaining [imperceptible] as subject" (Chidester, 2008, p. 159). Because

Whiteness "is perceived as if it has a normative essence" (Fuss, 1989, p. 20) and cannot be

"affix[ed] to any single communicative text or set of discourses" (Chidester, 2008, p. 159), it is

difficult to map and study (Krizek & Nakayama, 1995). Christine Sleeter (1994) observes that

White privilege is often "invisible to [Whites] partly because numerically we constitute the

majority of this nation and collectively control a large portion of the nation's resources and

media" (p. 6). Ultimately, "the rhetorical power of whiteness is founded in its ability to avoid

any explicit statements about [its] racial centrality. It is a perpetual silence that resists any critical

study of whiteness's social instantiation" (Chidester, 2008, p. 158).

Because notions of racial power are implicitly encoded in mass media, there is significant

research potential in applying critical race theory to popular film and television texts. Scholar

Patricia J. Williams (1995) argues that mainstream American entertainment suppresses minority

cultures in favor of mass entertainment that will not alienate the dominant culture, which she

characterizes as Whiteness itself. A previous study applied critical race theory to the animated Walt Disney films *The Lion King*, *Mulan* and *Pocahontas*, each of which was released in the 1990s. The purpose of this study was to identify the presence of microaggressions and racial slights in these films, all of which demonstrate foreign locations and cultures but are Americanized for western audiences (Bi Lin, Cappiccie, Chadha & Snyder, 2012). Because of Walt Disney's cultural influence, as well as its "history of conflating children's entertainment with children's education" (p. 49), such films exert strong influence in molding the initial perceptions young audiences hold towards other races and ethnicities. Scholar Alessandra Raengo (2016) has also employed critical race theory to analyze the racial commentary of the 2000 Spike Lee film *Bamboozled*, which serves as a satirical commentary on the commodity of Blackness by White producers within Hollywood.

Through critical race theory, culturally significant texts such as *Breaking Bad* and *The Walking Dead* can be analyzed for how they reflect the constitutive role that race continues to play in popular media and other formative facets of American culture, as well as how these texts serve to reinforce White hegemony. For example, while *Breaking Bad*'s ensemble features a number of African and Latino American characters, such characters are often presented as violent, murderous criminals, many of whom Walt incapacitates through violent force. Moreover, this narrative arc deserves accent considering the racial dynamics of *Breaking Bad*:

> The show's capacity to allegorize various dimensions of the post-2008 [economic] crisis as one of white masculinity blocked viewers from drawing political connections with the text that might interrupt their enjoyment of Walt's highly objectionable character. [Walt] is explicitly raced and gendered … He allies with a white supremacist biker gang to engineer a series of brutal prison murders, and kills many foreign Latin@ and feminized figures to consolidate power (Johnson, 2017, p. 17).

The most radical of Trump's supporters are identified as belonging to the alt-right (short for alternative right), a loosely connected movement consisting of numerous fringe and extremist hate groups. The alt-right and their beliefs, which include White nationalism and supremacy, antifeminism, and men's rights, experienced considerable media attention during the 2016 United States presidential election (Kirchick, 2016; Ryan, 2018). When considering the consequent mainstreaming of such toxic ideologies, popular television series having protagonists that suppress women and minorities could be interpreted as sharing ideological traits associated with the alt-right and invite critical analysis. This project shall demonstrate how selected episodes from *Breaking Bad* and *The Walking Dead* exemplify cultural concordances with socially regressive ideologies linked to Trump's political platform.

Methodology

In critical media studies broadly, and in television studies in particular, there are varying methods through which to conduct research. Methods that approach television studies, especially from a critical/cultural studies perspective, can be rooted in such varied areas as economics, history and politics (Butler, 2012). Critical/cultural studies "explores the significance and meaning of culture, whether it is popular, transitory, or sanctified by traditions of scholarship and patronage" (Lewis & Miller, 2003, p. 4). Although television and other mediums of popular entertainment have been described as the "mouthpiece" for culture (Brummett, 1994, p. 29), cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1997) explains that:

Culture … is not so much a set of things – novels and painting or TV [programs] or comics – as a process, a set of practices. Primarily, culture is concerned with the production and exchange of meanings – the 'giving and taking of meaning' – between the members of a society or group … Thus culture depends on its participants interpreting meaningfully what is around them, and 'making sense' of the world, in broadly similar

ways (p. 2).

Critical/cultural scholars analyze cultural artifacts and practices not only on their own merits, but also in relation to the specific contexts that produced them (Armstrong, 2006). Because popular texts "function as public discourses that address or at least resonate with broader issues in the historical and socio-political context in which they are situated" (Giroux, 2001, p. 22), the intent of this critical/cultural research project is to identify and assess ways that 21st century antihero series appear to reflect contemporary masculine anxieties. For its methodology, this project employs critical discourse analysis and critical historiography, the latter of which is used to examine the themes of a text in relation to its historical period (Godfrey, 2006).

Critical Discourse Analysis

Discourse, defined as "a linguistic form of knowledge and power" (Laughey, 2007, p. 139), is "recognized as being socially constitutive and socially conditioned. [Discourse] constitutes situations, objects of knowledge, and the social identities of relationships between people and groups of people" (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997, p. 258). Because discourse is regarded "as a form of social practice" (Ansari, Asadollahzadeh & Sharifi, 2016, p. 51), scholars thus use critical discourse analysis to study how "social power abuse, dominance and inequality are enacted [or] resisted" through oral communication and media texts (van Dijk, 2008, p. 85). Norman Fairclough is credited with the development of critical discourse analysis, which draws from "philosophical and linguistic bases [such as] certain branches of social theory and earlier discourse analysis, text linguistics, and interactional sociolinguistics" (Tenorio, 2011, p. 188). Fairclough outlined the concept in his 1989 book *Language and Power* (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000), and in the decades since critical discourse analysis has been widely employed for social intervention. Among critical discourse analysts, a prominent research subject "is that of inequality and the positioning of individuals and groups in contemporary social and political

hierarchies" (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000, p. 458). Researchers thus utilize critical discourse

analysis to interrogate such status quos "by detecting, analyzing, and also resisting and

counteracting enactments of power abuse as transmitted in private and public discourses"

(Tenorio, 2011, p. 187). Indeed, discourse serves not only as a context for dominant groups or

individuals to exercise their own power; instead, discourse "is also a context for [this] power to

be questioned, challenged [and] contested" (Matusitz & Pafford, 2017, p. 276).

Popular media texts, with their potential to engage mass audiences, are particularly ripe

for analysis. Critical discourse analysis is thus used to establish "connections between social and

cultural structures and processes … and properties of [the] text" (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997, p.

277). Critical discourse analysis regards discourse as "an opaque power object in modern

societies [and] aims to make it more visible and transparent" (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000, p.

448). Despite its obscurity, discourse wields significant power and influence as an "instrument of

the social construction of reality" (van Leeuwen, 1993, p. 193), with media discourse especially

serving as "the main source of people's knowledge, attitudes, and ideologies, both of elites and

ordinary citizens" (Ansari, Asadollahzadeh & Sharifi, 2016, p. 46). As explained by Hall (1982),

media discourse, rather than reflecting reality, works to "defin[e] reality. Rather than

transforming already existing meaning, the media, through the active work of selecting,

presenting, structuring, and shaping, are making things mean" (p. 6). Because critical discourse

analysis is largely concerned with "the analysis of social wrongs such as prejudice" (Tenorio,

2011, p. 188), media scholars use critical discourse analysis "to uncover patterns and messages"

(Matusitz & Pafford, 2017, p. 276) in mass media that promote prejudiced behavior and thinking.

Critical discourse analysis is not without its detractors. Some scholars characterize the

concept as a "biased, unprincipled, conventional, decontextualized cherry-picking of linguistic

features, closer to impressionistic commentary" (Tenorio, 2011, p. 195). Critical discourse

analysis has also been criticized for "not analyz[ing] how a text can be read in many ways, or under what social circumstances it is produced and consumed" (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000, p. 455). However, because the work of critical discourse analysts "is admittedly and ultimately political," scholar Teun A. van Dijk (1993), himself a prominent analyst, asserts that "critical discourse analysts (should) take an explicit sociopolitical stance: they spell out their point of view, perspective, principles and aims, both within their discipline and within society at large" (p. 252). Henry G. Widdowson has also faulted critical discourse analysis "for its blurring of important distinctions between concepts, disciplines, and methodologies" (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000, p. 455). However, because critical discourse analysis is not a complete method in itself, it is commonly "situated within a wider panorama of common concerns, questions, and approaches developing among a much wider scholarly community" (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000, p. 460). This actually remedies the most commonly cited "theoretical and methodological weaknesses [of critical discourse analysis], notably those related to the treatments of context" (p. 460).

Consequently, critical discourse analysis remains a strong approach through which to study episodes of *Breaking Bad* and *The Walking Dead* as politicized texts, provided that these analyses take into account social and historical frames of reference. Specifically, how did these series help cultivate ideologies of toxic masculinity and White power that harmonized with Donald Trump's sociopolitical positions and resonated with his supporters? Because research into "serious social problems [like prejudice] are naturally complex, this usually [requires] a multidisciplinary approach," with research incorporating critical discourse analysis also utilizing additional "theories, descriptions, [and] methods" that compensate for the shortcomings of critical discourse analysis and simultaneously contribute to the researchers' goals for social intervention (van Dijk, 1993, p. 252).

Critical Historiography

Critical historiography is a mixed-methods approach that amalgamates critical methodology, oftentimes textual analysis, with historical analysis (Godfrey, 2006). This comprehensive approach is extremely productive in analyzing media depictions of race and gender in popular television series of the new millennium in relation to contemporary cultural shifts and events such as 9/11, the Great Recession, and Trump's election. Through its combination of textual and historical analyses, critical historiography emphasizes "the importance of culture in shaping society and history" (Armstrong, 2006, p. 150).

Textual analysis. Textual analysis is a basic form of critical methodology utilized by researchers to analyze the content of media texts, accomplished through close reading (Fürsich, 2009). The specific purpose of textual analysis is to distinguish "between the primary, linguistic meaning of a [media] text's component parts and the secondary, or textual meaning which those parts acquire through a structuring process internal to the text" (Altman, 1984, p. 15). These secondary textual meanings can encompass "various forms of discourses, ideological positions, narrative strategies, image construction and effects" (Kellner, 1995, p. 10).

Today, textual analysis is ubiquitous in popular media studies and commonly employed in critical discourse analysis (van Dijk, 1991). Although film scholars have employed the method for decades, researchers only began in the 1970s applying textual analysis to television programs. In the following decades, textual analysis has evolved into a similarly prominent method within the field of television studies (Gray & Lotz, 2012). Because producers of popular culture generally adhere to the "rigidly defined values and beliefs of the social institution within which their work is produced and circulated" (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2011, p. 115), researchers "who conduct textual analysis of media content are confident that it will yield evidence about a culture in a particular time and place" (Armstrong, 2006, p. 155). For this particular project,

textual analysis is applied to *Breaking Bad* and *The Walking Dead* to determine how toxic ideologies were destigmatized and mainstreamed in recent years among a particular section of the American voting population.

Textual analysis has a close relationship with genre studies, which deconstructs the conventions and expectations of media texts within different genres. Genre, a French word "meaning 'type' or 'kind,' is probably the most common way that viewers [categorize] television programs" (Butler, 2012, p. 375). Archetypal entertainment genres include – but are not limited to – comedy, horror, romance, science fiction, and western. Generally, genres have their own specific aesthetic and narrative tropes. For example, horror films have generally very dark cinematography, in order to enhance viewers' sense of dread. The general narrative of many romantic comedies sees two future lovers meet and grow close, separate after a fight, only to reconcile and get married by the end of the film. Because each genre has inherent styles and themes understood by both a text's producers and its audience, "this shared code and its implicit shared values make genres particularly important to the study of a society's belief systems at any one point in time… Genre-based television programs, some argue, operate as modern-day rituals that reinforce certain values and social beliefs" (p. 375). Recognizing the genre of a television series places it within a certain context for understanding the society it comments on, in this case the antihero-focused, hyper-masculine crime dramas of the 2000s and 2010s.

There are several unique forms of textual analysis, such as rhetorical criticism. Rhetorical criticism is employed by scholars to identify the persuasive messages within oratory and visual communications, as well as evaluate their influential capability (Jasinski, 2001). Although rhetorical scholarship ostensibly invites researchers "to investigate and grapple with the communicative phenomena that surround us" (Birkholt, Hatfield & Hinck, 2007, p. 145), rhetoric has historically been viewed as "the exclusive province of verbal language" (Kenney &

Scott, 2003, p. 19), with traditional rhetoricians "suggesting that visual symbols [were]

insignificant or inferior, and [thus] largely ignoring the impacts of the visual in [the] world"

(Foss, 2004, p. 303). Messaris was an early advocate for the capability of visual images to make

arguments, although this assertion proved controversial (Borchers, 2006). Many scholars argued

against including visual elements in rhetoric and argumentation (Blair, 1996, 2004; Fleming,

1996; Foss, 2004), with their arguments being largely "based on two claims: (1) visual images

are inherently ambiguous; and (2) arguments must be propositional … because they contain

claims and reasons that can be affirmed or rejected" (Birkholt, Hatfield & Hinck, 2007, p. 145).

Counterarguments that champion the study of visual elements in rhetorical scholarships assert

that while images can be vague or ambiguous, so too is linguistic language (Birdsell & Groarke,

1996). In visual arguments, "the propositions and their argumentative function and roles are

[simply] expressed visually" (Blair, 1996, p. 26), with a concentrated "attempt to communicate

the claim and reason(s)" behind the argument (p. 24).

Beginning in the late 1990s, rhetorical scholarship became more accepting of studying

the potential of visual images in persuasive rhetoric (Birdsell & Goarke, 1996; Blair, 1996;

Cameron, 1996; Fleming, 1996; LaWare, 1998). This pivot was in response to the increased

"visual orientation of contemporary society and the richness and complexity of visual images"

(LaWare 1998, p. 140), and the recognition that ignorance towards these visual symbols would

inhibit "understanding of much of the world around us" (Birkholt, Hatfield & Hinck, 2007, p.

145). By the dawn of the new millennium, many rhetorical scholars were "concentrating on the

persuasive messages carried in popular [visual] culture. This shift of academic attention to

popular culture was driven by the recognition that much of the power in society was defined and

negotiated in people's everyday encounters with the messages of popular culture" (Armstrong,

2006, p. 151), which played a "powerful role … in shaping our public symbolic actions"

(Finnegan, Hope & Olson, 2008, p. 1). During the following decades, visual rhetoric studies

"gained wide acceptance as scholars [strove] to understand the power of visual persuasion in

'texts' such as paintings, films and commercial websites" (Buchanan-Oliver & Bulmer, 2006, p.

55). Today, such studies are "centered predominantly in the public performances and visual

technologies of 20th century politics" (Gronbeck, 2008, p. xxii). In addition, media scholars also

employ rhetorical criticism to determine how persuasive messages in popular visual texts, such

as movies and television episodes, can influence audiences' perceptions towards particular

subjects, including social, political, and religious topics.

Ultimately, rhetorical criticism is a robust tool for social criticism and analyzing how

communication texts comment on current sociocultural trends (Botan, Frey & Kreps, 1999).

According to Celeste Condit (1990), it is "the exacting reading of texts as they are situated in

history that constitutes rhetorical criticism as a distinct discipline in the humanities" (p. 332).

Nevertheless, situating texts within history cannot be accomplished solely through rhetorical

criticism, visual or otherwise:

> Scholarship in visual rhetoric is strongest when it combines the conceptual resources of
>
> the rhetorical tradition itself – the lexicon of terms that rhetorical scholars have
>
> developed over time to help them understand the nature and functions of persuasive
>
> communication – with the conceptual resources developed by scholars in other fields
>
> (Finnegan, Hope & Olson, 2008, p. 2).

For example, situating a text within the historical period in which it was produced allows

researchers greater insight into its themes, but requires a separate method. When conducting such

studies, historical analysis is the most applicable method through which to accomplish this goal.

Historical analysis. In simplest terms, historical analysis is "the study of methods and

techniques in historical research as a part of a body of historical writing" (Godfrey, 2006, p. 7).

Researchers employ historical analysis "to establish relationships [and] determine possible cause-and-effect relationships" (Marshall & Roseman, 2006, p. 119) during a particular time period, some of which "would not have been readily apparent" otherwise (Godfrey, 2006, p. 21). Historical analysis can be applied to written texts, such as diaries, journals, letters, and newspapers, as well as popular texts such as films and television episodes. Because historical context informs the messages of a media text, as well as audience reception to those messages, historical analysis of media texts is a pragmatic method through which researchers can not only better understand current sociocultural trends, but also "more effectively construct the future [trends]" of a society (Godfrey, 2006, p. 23).

An early advocate for historical analysis of visually mediated works was British scholar Raymond Williams. Beforehand, traditional historians and scholars had almost exclusively explored the media's influence on society. However, Williams believed that historical analysis of "imaginative works and other evidence that would help [cultural scholars] understand the influential meanings and values within a particular culture" (Armstrong, 2006, p. 150). Williams believed that culture and history were deeply intertwined, and that both influenced the other. Following the blueprint established by Williams, culture scholars began to view "the media as a part of society and therefore influenced by various factors outside the media themselves" (Sloan & Stamm, 2010, p. 41). They started to analyze society's influence on media, recognizing historical context as critical to understanding communication texts, as they reflected the specific economic and sociocultural environments and periods in which they were produced. Today, even traditional historians recognize that television not only informs the American social landscape but is also informed by it. Thus, they have similarly adopted "a much more serious view of media … for historical content" (Davidson & Lytle, 2000, p. 393). In summary, historical analysis is a pragmatic tool that bolsters researchers' ability for reasoning. Historical analysis is

integral "to really understand what is happening at a given moment" (Godfrey, 2006, p. 6), as historical context informs both the messages of a media text and audience reception to these messages.

Background of Critical/Cultural Media Studies

Critical Discourse Analysis

Because critical discourse analysis examines how media texts and other discourse structures support social dominance, studies that employ critical discourse analysis are often concerned with "such notions as 'power', 'dominance', 'hegemony', 'ideology', 'class', 'gender', 'race', [and] 'discrimination'" (van Dijk, 2008, p. 87). Each of these individual notions is relevant to this particular research project, and has been represented in previous studies that explore how misogyny, prejudice, and racism are normalized and promoted through mass media. After 9/11 "intensified anti-Muslim feelings and consolidated Islamophobia in Western countries" (Ansari, Asadollahzadeh & Sharifi, 2016, p. 48), a study was conducted utilizing critical discourse analysis to demonstrate how mainstream news channels, particularly CNN, portrayed Islam "as a threat to Western civilization and values" (p. 46). The study concluded that CNN's biased and stereotyped presentation of Islam had indeed contributed to the increased mainstreaming of Islamophobic ideology – ideology that Trump similarly espoused and catered to during his presidential campaign (Coppins, 2016; Haberman, 2015; Hillyard, 2015; Johnson, 2015).

In addition to news discourse, critical discourse analysis has also been employed in studies of popular media discourse. Nicole Kypker (2017) applied critical discourse analysis to renowned television producer Norman Lear's popular sitcom *Maude*, a spinoff of *All in the Family*. *Maude*, which ran on CBS from 1972 to 1978, was recognized for its socially relevant storylines and commitment to social justice. However, Kypker wished to determine if

representations of sexual assault in *Maude*, particularly in the episode "The Tax Audit" (Kahn &

Cooper, 1974), appeared to perpetuate victim blaming. Victim blaming is the practice of holding

victims of assault responsible for their trauma, rather than the attackers. Victim blaming is an

especially prominent component of rape culture, which describes the societal normalization of

rape and sexual assault (Gadalla & Suarez, 2010). In "The Tax Audit," Maude recognizes the

man her husband Walter has hired to conduct his tax audit from an attempted date rape three

decades prior, Kypker (2017) writes:

> When she confronts him, he initially does not remember the occurrence, and then
>
> recollects it differently. He explains that he was a young man, about to go to war, and that
>
> Maude had been very attractive, and still is. She is flattered by the compliment, and when
>
> he apologizes for the long-ago attack, which he remembers differently, she forgives him;
>
> the episode ends with Maude waving him goodbye ('nice seeing you again') (p. 16).

Through application of critical discourse analysis, Kypker concludes that the *Maude* episode

suggests that acquaintance rape can be sympathized and understood "as the result of

uncontrollable male lust" (p. 18), although Kypker acknowledges that subsequent work by Lear

was much more progressive in its handing of such a dark subject.

Another study by Jonathan Matusitz and Audrey Pafford (2017) applied critical discourse

analysis to the inaugural season of *Quantico*, a thriller series that aired on ABC from 2015 to

2018. *Quantico* is recognized as the first American drama to be headlined by a South Asian

actor, Indian actress Priyanka Chopra. Chopra plays Alex Parrish, an Indian American FBI

recruit who is framed for a terrorist attack in New York City, and *Quantico* follows her quest to

prove her innocence. Although the series has been acclaimed for its diversity, Matusitz and

Pafford wished to determine if the portrayal of female superiority in *Quantico*, embodied by its

Indian American protagonist, was hampered by an unintentional but regressive portrayal of race:

It is important to note that, in relation to this study, "superiority" is not meant to connote

egoism, essentialism or the intellectual dominance of one sex over another. Rather,

superiority is a term that alludes to the change primetime television has undergone that

puts female main characters in a more active and independent position in relation to men

– which is in contrast to the dominant trends of prime-time TV in the past. The social

portrayals of lead female characters on prime-time TV that have created this change are

what we have sought to examine (p. 273 – 274).

As evidenced by these two studies, the basic purpose of critical discourse analysis is to

identify the social consequences of rhetorical discourse, visual or otherwise. Such research is

complex, as "the link between text and society is mediated [by audiences]" (van Dijk, 2008, p.

86). In lay terms, this means that film and television discourse "can be interpreted in very

different ways, due to the audience and the amount of context information which is included"

(Fairclough & Wodak, 1997, p. 280).

Critical Historiography

Julie D'Acci (1995) previously employed critical historiography to analyze *Cagney &*

Lacey, an American police procedural that aired on CBS from 1982 to 1988. *Cagney & Lacey*

was the first police procedural in history where both lead characters were women, both of them

detectives in the New York Police Department. Christine Cagney and Mary Beth Lacey bucked

many contemporary trends regarding televisual representation of women; they were competent,

active investigators rather than sexually objectified damsels in distress. *Cagney & Lacey* featured

"women in a traditionally male profession, and women in a standard male-public sphere genre.

Historically and industrially speaking, its creators considered it an idea whose time had come"

(p. 456). However, as with any attempt to buck the status quo, the series proved controversial.

Throughout its run, *Cagney & Lacey* was "the site of intense public debates over various

definitions of femininity" (p. 455). D'Acci described *Cagney & Lacey* as a reaction to Reagan-era conservatism, with scripts being frequently "modeled on the concerns of the early liberal women's movement in America, especially equal pay and sexual harassment at work" (p. 455). D'Acci's use of critical historiography is integral to understanding just how pioneering and groundbreaking *Cagney & Lacey* was. The feminist themes D'Acci identifies in the series using textual analysis were relevant to its audience because of the historical context she addresses, i.e. the emerging feminist movement.

Another noteworthy example "of historical, textual analysis is Herman Gray's study of *Frank's Place*" (Armstrong, 2006, p. 155), a comedy-drama series. *Frank's Place* aired for a single season on CBS, premiering in September 1987 and concluding in March 1988. The series featured a predominantly Black cast and frequently addressed themes of racism and social inequality. *Frank's Place* was critically acclaimed and nominated for five Primetime Emmy Awards in 1988, including Outstanding Comedy Series. Nevertheless, the findings of Gray's research demonstrate that the series' racial commentary was "simplified and contained so as not to challenge a mass audience that included White Americans" (p. 155). Gray (2003) argues that *Frank's Place* serves as a microcosm of White hegemony in the late 1980s, with Black perspectives and sensibilities being contained, so as not to infringe upon White sensibilities within broader American culture. Ultimately, "Gray's findings, that a mass-audience television program reflected and negotiated tensions within the larger culture of the late 1980s, demonstrate the kind of social knowledge that the methods of cultural studies can yield when applied to historical inquiry" (Armstrong, 2006, p. 155). As evidenced by these previous studies, critical methodology is a strong method through which to conduct research into how contemporaneous historical factors that challenged White male privilege in the United States influenced the portrayal of gender and race relations in popular media.

Conclusion

In the fields of textual and rhetorical criticism, scholars analyze texts that reflect, or even inform, the cultural zeitgeists of their times. For example, Kenneth Burke (1973), the foremost rhetorical scholar of rhetoric of the 20th century, critiqued Adolf Hitler's autobiography *Mein Kampf* because it exhibited a distillation of the themes and myths that would later prove to be so persuasive in Nazi Germany, particularly antisemitism and ethnic cleansing. Because popular broadcast media especially "educate[s] us about how to behave and what to think, feel, believe, fear and desire" (Kellner, 1995, p. 2), it is important to analyze media messages for how they influence contemporary cultural values. Within the field of visual rhetoric, "studying visual themes and noting their incidence within particular contexts and mapping their relationships with similar or opposing themes is a means of gaining insights into the [intended message] of the communicator" (Buchanan-Oliver & Bulmer, 2006, p. 55), as well as the audience's understanding of these messages and themes. In addition to theme, other important terms in visual and narrative rhetoric include medium, realism, abstraction, and ambiguity:

> Medium concerns the channel(s) through which the message is transmitted, including sound, movement, color, and light. … Realism concerns the degree to which the image accurately reflects the object that it is intended to represent in the argument. … Abstraction is the degree to which the image transcends any particular … time, or location. Finally, ambiguity is the degree to which multiple meanings may attach to an image (Birkholt, Hatfield & Hinck, 2007, p. 149 – 150).

Ambiguity is a particularly key concept in this research project. What textual evidence in *Breaking Bad* and *The Walking Dead* invited audiences to interpret the series as condemning the regressive practices of toxic White masculinity? What textual elements in these series and others seem to have promoted the very practices they were attempting to chastise? How did they

portray and then possibly invite normalizing of regressive modes of raced and gendered interactions? Can the depiction of such material be connected to how voting patterns in the latest presidential election resulted in the favored candidate of White supremacists ascending to the office of president?

By providing an array of theoretical and methodological insights that connect voting patterns with television viewing of *Breaking Bad* and *The Walking Dead*, I argue that these two series invite White supremacist readings among select viewers and voters as sociopolitical and cultural texts. In order to examine the racial and gendered content of these series and apply it to modern historical context, this study examines a specific selection of episodes from both series. These episodes, which function as units of rhetorical critical analysis, were chosen based on oral and visual rhetoric that appear to invite prejudiced readings that would be particularly salient in White, working class segments of the shows' audiences, thus influencing their support of Trump and contributing to their voting decisions.

For this research, specific episodes that are analyzed for *Breaking Bad*'s case study include all seven episodes of its inaugural season: the series pilot (Gilligan, 2008), "Cat's in the Bag…" (Gilligan & Bernstein, 2008), "Cancer Man" (Gilligan & McKay, 2008), "Gray Matter" (Lin & Brock, 2008), "Crazy Handful of Nothin'" (Mastras & Hughes, 2008), and "A No-Rough-Stuff-Type Deal" (Gould & Hunter, 2008). Additional episodes include "Seven Thirty-Seven" (Roberts & Cranston, 2009), "Breakage" (Walley-Beckett & Renck, 2009), "Peekaboo" (Gilligan, Roberts, & Medak, 2009), "Mandala" (Mastras & Bernstein, 2009), and "Phoenix" (Shiban & Bucksey, 2009) from the second season, No Más" (Gilligan & Cranston, 2010), "I.F.T." (Mastras & MacLaren, 2010), "One Minute" (Schnauz & MacLaren, 2010), and "Abiquiu" (Schnauz, Shiban & MacLaren, 2010) from the third season, "Box Cutter" (Gilligan & Bernstein, 2011), "Cornered" (Hutchison & Slovis, 2011), "Hermanos" (Catlin, Mastras &

Renck, 2011), and "Face Off" (Gilligan 2011) from the fourth season, and "Madrigal" (Gilligan

& MacLaren, 2012), "Fifty-One" (Catlin & Johnson, 2012), "Gliding Over All" (Wallet-Beckett

& MacLaren, 2012), "Ozymandias" (Walley-Beckett & Johnson, 2013), and "Felina" (Gilligan,

2013) from the fifth and final season.

Specific episodes from *The Walking Dead* that are analyzed for its own case study

include "Days Gone Bye" (Darabont, 2010), "Tell It to the Frogs" (Darabont, Eglee, LoGiudice

& Horder-Payton, 2010), "Guts" (Darabont & MacLaren, 2010), "Vatos" (Kirkman & Renck,

2010), and "TS-19" (Darabont, Fierro & Ferland, 2010) from the first season, "Secrets" (Kang &

Boyd), "What Lies Ahead" (Bey, Kirkman & Horder-Payton, 2011), "Chupacabra" (Johnson &

Ferland, 2011), "18 Miles Out" (Gimple, Mazzara & Dickerson, 2012), "Better Angels"

(Mazzara, Reilly & Ferland, 2012), and "Beside the Dying Fire" (Kirkman, Mazzara &

Dickerson, 2012) from the second season, "Seed" (Mazzara & Dickerson, 2012), "Killer Within"

(Kim & Ferland, 2012), "Made to Suffer" (Kirkman & Gierhart, 2012), and "Home" (Beattie &

Mann, 2013) from the third season, "Isolation" (Kirkman & Sackheim, 2013) and "Indifference"

(Negrete & Brock, 2013) from the fourth season, "Remember" (Powell & Nicotero, 2015), "Try"

(Kang & Satrazemis, 2015), and "Conquer" (Gimple, Hoffman & Nicotero, 2015) from the fifth

season, "Now" (Reed & Youabian, 2015) and "Last Day on Earth" (Gimple, Negrete &

Nicotero, 2016) from the sixth season, "The Day Will Come When You Won't Be" (Gimple &

Nicotero, 2016) and "New Best Friends" (Powell & January, 2017) from the seventh season, and

"Mercy" (Gimple & Nicotero, 2017) from the eighth season.

As explained by cultural critic Steven W. Schoen (2017), "when we tell stories about our

world – indeed anytime we make sense of our experiences through language – the

representations function as drama" (p. 144), and the scene functions as a key rhetorical

mechanism to structure and study drama. As defined by rhetorician Kenneth Burke (1945), a

scene is "a blanket term for the concept of background or setting in general, a name for any situation in which acts or agents are placed" (p. xvi). These backgrounds and settings can be highly varied, referring to environments, societal, cultural movements, or "particular places, [and] situations" (p. 12). Schoen (2017) expands on this definition, explaining:

> Scene [is] a dynamic mechanism of connection, structuring possibilities for innovation at the intersection of cultural meaning and identity. That is, scene structures meanings: it locates us, with that location doing work to help define who people are, what they do, how they do it, and why they do it (p. 145).

A scene can be studied for textual analysis, as it "structures meaning in its interaction with actions, people, processes, and purposes. We understand a person walking city streets differently from the ways in which we understand the same person walking in the woods" (p. 144).

Scenes that receive particular focus over the course of this research are Walt and Rick's interactions with women and various minority characters in their respective ensembles. I will highlight textual elements of these scenes, such as character dialogue and action, and subtextual elements, such as the framing and lighting of individual shots,[9] which can further "contribute to our sense of character[s]" (Butler, 2012, p. 63). I shall also highlight the actors' performances, which also communicate semiotic signs; recognized elements of a performance include vocal, facial, gestural, and corporeal signs.

It is important to note that the concept of "performance" is not solely restricted to the art of acting:

> Performance [can] refer to cultural practices in everyday life, such as eating, fashion, exercise, family rituals, social and communal activities, and political campaigns. The concept of performance is also about ways that subjects act in everyday encounters and

---

[9] Referred to in film and television production as cinematography.

> that involve ways to move, gesture, speak, dialogue, and dress … Finally, performance
>
> may also refer to how subjects embody or enact aspects of cultural identity (Hladki, 2009,
>
> p. 122).

Gender theorist Judith Butler (1999) argues that gender itself is largely performative, influenced

and dictated by social expectations. In *Breaking Bad*, "Walt's understanding of the criminal

underworld is gleaned from popular culture, and his gauche attempts to adopt the hyper-

masculine performance of the drug lord [as Heisenberg] are the source of much amusement both

at the level of diegesis and outside of the narrative performance" (Bentham, 2017, p. 167).

Nevertheless, Walt's Heisenberg persona is popularly referred to as "badass" by a certain

segment of the fandom and exalted online, also despite – or perhaps because of – how the

character ruthlessly dominates women and racial minorities in response for what he perceives to

be challenges to his status. Ultimately, by exploring possible cultural linkages between Trump's

popular support and the hypermasculine protagonists of *Breaking Bad* and *The Walking Dead*,

this project promises a novel understanding of the current American sociocultural reality.

CHAPTER 3. FREAKING MAD: WALTER WHITE, MASCULINE ANXIETY, AND

CONFLICTING SOCIAL DISCOURSE

Background

Breaking Bad premiered on AMC on January 20, 2008. The pilot introduces many of the

series' main characters, including Walt; his pregnant wife, Skyler; his son, Walt Jr.; Skyler's

sister, Marie; Marie's husband, Hank Schrader, who is a Drug Enforcement Administration

(DEA) agent; and Walt's former high school student, Jesse Pinkman. In the pilot, Walt is

diagnosed with inoperable lung cancer. In order to provide for Skyler and their teenage son Walt

Jr., Walt Sr. decides to become a drug manufacturer. He recruits Jesse, a local drug dealer, to

help him sell the methamphetamine that he cooks. Walt is a genius chemist, and his

methamphetamine, which earns the street name "Blue Sky," is far purer than anything that has

ever been present in Albuquerque's drug market. Walt himself becomes known as "Heisenberg,"

an alias that he adopts from Werner Heisenberg, a German theoretical physicist. While Gilligan

has never specified why Heisenberg was selected for Walt's pseudonym, Werner Heisenberg

was a pioneer of quantum mechanics, especially famous for the uncertainty principle. While

Walt, being a scientist, would have respected Heisenberg's academic contributions, Heisenberg's

uncertainty principle also describes Walt and Jesse's character arcs. It is also worth noting that

Heisenberg was a scientist for Hitler's Nazi Party (Conradt, 2013).

As the series progresses, Blue Sky becomes popular and Walt and Jesse amass a vast

fortune. "Heisenberg" becomes the target of an investigation led by Hank, who ultimately

discovers Walt's secret and convinces Jesse to turn on him. In response, Walt hires a Neo-Nazi

gang to kill Jesse, only to be double-crossed by them: the gang robs Walt of his fortune, enslaves

Jesse, and murders Hank. Walt is forced to flee Albuquerque after his crimes are revealed to the

public. After several months in hiding, Walt returns to Albuquerque and executes the entire

gang, avenging Hank's death. Walt also frees Jesse before dying of a bullet wound.

At its core, *Breaking Bad* functions as an extended morality play. As the series progresses and Walt is pulled deeper into the city's drug trade, his personality correspondingly becomes more aggressive and violent. Despite his gradual evolution into a murderous drug baron, Walt remains the unquestioned protagonist of the series. Gilligan has stated his goal for *Breaking Bad* was for audiences to begin questioning whom they were rooting for and why. In order to pose these questions, the series ruminates at length on the reciprocal effects of Walt's actions, both on the Albuquerque community as a whole and his immediate family, particularly Skyler (Sepinwall, 2015).

While *Breaking Bad* is praised for its deconstruction of toxic masculinity and modern masculine anxiety, a vocal section of *Breaking Bad*'s fandom, commonly referred to online as "Team Walt" (Cameron, 2013; Douthat, 2013; Seitz, 2013), misinterpreted Gilligan's intended commentary. In *Breaking Bad*, Walt justifies his entry into Albuquerque's drug trade by portraying himself as an economic underdog, with his meager teaching job unable to pay for his chemotherapy. Joseph Cherrez (2017), writing for conservative magazine *National Review*, likens "the feelings and perceptions of Walter White [to] those of Trump's early and most enthusiastic supporters" (para. 7) in terms of supposed marginalization and anger. Nevertheless, in terms of education and opportunities, Walt is not disadvantaged, specifically because of the racial privilege he is afforded in American society as a White man. Similarly, White, blue-collar Americans largely facilitated Trump's election. Despite maintaining societal privilege, many individuals in this social group nevertheless felt threatened by the country's increasing diversification and multiculturalism and rallied behind Trump, viewing him as a defender of Whiteness.

As Walt's reputation and success as Heisenberg grows, he is forced to confront various Latino individuals to maintain control of the city's drug trade. He also dominates his wife Skyler, who eventually learns about and objects to his activities as Heisenberg. Team Walt construes these elements of the series, identified through visual rhetorical analysis and rhetorical criticism, as both representing idealized masculinity and preserving natural gender and racial hierarchy (Clarke, 2017; Cowlishaw, Cowlishaw, Dawe, Gerlich, Gross, Johnston & Pettis, 2015). Similarly, Trump is lauded by his supporters for protecting these hierarchies through his staunch opposition to political correctness. Political correctness embodies language and policies introduced by American higher education in the early 1990s to protect marginalized communities, such as women or racial minorities, from possible disadvantage or offense. The term would eventually be adopted as a shorthand pejorative in for debates regarding social progressivism, with conservatives generally deriding modern political correctness as excessive and hindering free speech. Many have cited feminism as representing the worst of political correctness, characterizing the ideology as "depend[ing] on active hostility towards men" and responsible for "the claimed decline of 'manliness' in American culture" (Anderson, Elsayegh & Kanner, 2009). Ultimately, *Breaking Bad*'s artistic regard lends an aura of legitimacy to its commentary and themes, even when the series is misrepresented as sharing Trump's mission to reclaim what is perceived to be White masculinity's natural hegemony, rather than criticizing such notions of assumed superiority.

Gilligan has expressed surprise that so many fans empathized with Walt and defended his wrongdoings (Sepinwall, 2015). Much of Walt's perceived sympathy is attributed to lead actor Bryan Cranston, whose performance as Walt was critically acclaimed, resulting in a record four wins for Emmys for Outstanding Lead Actor in a Drama Series (Stache, 2017). However, like any form of communication, visual rhetoric is a complex system (Foss, 2004). Visual "images

can be juxtaposed to suggest associations, causal connections, contrasts, analogies, and generalizations [and] tap into existing cultural and historical knowledge within the audience" (Schill, 2012, p. 122). By tapping into this collectively held knowledge, visual images and symbols "are uniquely equipped to produce [strong] emotional response[s] from viewers" (p. 126 – 127), although these responses may differ based on personal cultural attitudes and beliefs (Haarman & Piazza, 2016; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Because popular texts "can be read differently by different audiences … this fact suggests the necessity of interpreting such texts in the specificity of the contexts in which they are received" (Giroux, 2001, p. 25). Indeed, there is significant research potential in identifying textual elements such as toxic masculinity Gilligan intended to condemn in *Breaking Bad*, theorizing how such elements were misinterpreted by certain audiences (i.e. Team Walt), and linking such phenomena to ongoing sociopolitical trends in the United States, particularly the destigmatization of misogyny and White supremacy in the American political sphere under Donald Trump's influence.

Visualizing Conflict in Social Definitions of Gender and Toxic Masculinity

The series begins on Walt's 50th birthday, although Walt has very little to celebrate. Years ago, Walt founded the company Gray Matter Technologies with his girlfriend Gretchen[10] and best friend Elliott Schwartz. Walt ultimately broke up with Gretchen and sold his share of the company to Elliott for $5,000. After Walt's departure, Elliott and Gretchen married and expanded Gray Matter into a multibillion-dollar company. Walt believes that much of Gray Matter's success derives from his own research and harbors extreme bitterness and resentment towards his former partners. In contrast to Elliott and Gretchen's successful careers, Walt now works as a chemistry teacher at his son's high school, where his students are not only disinterested in his lectures, but also openly disrespectful.

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[10] Gretchen's maiden name is never revealed in the series.

In an interview with television writer Alan Sepinwall (2009), Gilligan explains that the

pilot emphasizes Walt's feelings of unfulfillment and misery to make him sympathetic to

viewers, so they would be more accepting of his ultimate decision to enter Albuquerque's drug

trade:

> You [need] to see that underlying humanity, even when he's making the most devious,
>
> terrible decisions, and you need someone who has that humanity – deep down, bedrock
>
> humanity – so you say, watching this show, "All right, I'll go for this ride. I don't like
>
> what he's doing, but I understand, and I'll go with it for as far as it goes" (para. 9).

To accomplish this goal, the pilot (Gilligan, 2008) portrays Walt as emasculated, particularly in

his relationship with Skyler, who is pregnant with their future daughter Holly. Despite it being

Walt's birthday, Skyler, concerned for her husband's cholesterol, insists on feeding her husband

tofu bacon for breakfast. In American culture, "the consumption of meat is closely associated

with masculinity" (Rogers, 2008, p. 281). Modern food advertising portrays the substitution of

meat with tofu products as feminine and shameful, and Walt correspondingly exhibits reluctance

to consume the food. Oftentimes, "conflict and negotiation over diet in the context of marriage

involves … the 'taming' of masculinity by female partners" (Rogers, 2008, p. 292). This

"taming" is also exhibited when Skyler questions Walt's decision to put $15.88 on a credit card

they reserve for emergencies. Throughout the pilot, Skyler, rather than Walt, establishes

dominance over the White household.

The next day, Walt is diagnosed with inoperable lung cancer. Determined to secure his

family's financial future, Walt recruits Jesse. The two begin to clandestinely cook crystal

methamphetamine, although Skyler quickly becomes suspicious of Walt's secretive behavior. In

the second episode, "Cat's in the Bag…" (Gilligan & Bernstein, 2008), Skyler seeks out Jesse,

believing him to be Walt's marijuana dealer, and warns him to leave Walt alone. Jesse later

mocks Skyler as Walt's "psycho-bitch wife," and Walt for "[not] wearing the pants in the family," a pointed jab at his perceived lack of masculinity. The episode culminates during Skyler's ultrasound, where Walt, tired and annoyed of Skyler's questions regarding his activities, makes a request, his words dripping with sarcasm:

> WALT
> Right now, what I need is for you to climb down out of my ass.
> Can you do that? Will you do that for me, honey? Will you please,
> just once, get off my ass? You know? I'd appreciate it. I really
> would.

The camera lingers on Skyler's stunned expression, as she is so taken aback by Walt's declaration that she cannot think of a response. This scene, which is played for comic effect, is the first in the series where Walt stands up to his wife and is meant to be a triumphant moment for him, an assertion of his independence against what he perceives to be his controlling and shrewish wife.

In many ways, *Breaking Bad* portrays a perverse fantasy of liberated masculinity, with Jason Landrum (2015) observing that the series not only conjures "questions about who wears the pants … but more significantly, who deserves to wear and own the pants" (p. 94). Walt strives to symbolically reclaim these pants for himself and restore traditional gender hierarchy, with his subjugation of femininity being conveyed to audiences through his aggression towards Skyler and Gretchen. Popular television has been recognized as "provid[ing] models of relations with women and solutions to problems of gender relations … To the extent they do this, they contribute to hegemony in the society-wide gender order as a whole" (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 838). For viewers of *Breaking Bad* who supported Donald Trump in the last election, Walter White is similarly a crusader against the supposed noxious and virulent tendencies of modern feminism. Walt actively combats the threat of feminization represented by his wife, with his efforts horrifically culminating in emotional and sexual abuse.

Confronting Femininity and the Threat of Emasculation

Twentieth-century masculinity is a key theme of *Breaking Bad*. Gilligan intended to deconstruct contemporary masculine angst, particularly "the feeling within men that they are no longer in control – not of their homes or even themselves" (Faucette, 2014, p. 74). Indeed, *Breaking Bad*'s earliest episodes encourage audiences "to identify with a shy, intelligent man whose confidence has been undermined by his wife for years … [they] root for Walter because he overcomes the relatable barrier of low self-esteem while Skyler is positioned within the series as a domineering figure whose confidence was perhaps responsible, at least in part, for her husband's outlook on life" (Joy, 2017, p. 9). Because her function at the beginning of the series was to establish Walt "as an emasculated man fighting against the odds to regain some control over his life … Skyler's negative portrayal [fosters] viewers' empathetic connection with and acceptance of Walt" (Bentham, 2017, p. 176). Thus, it is no surprise that Skyler's role as the antagonistic wife was never popular with viewers. Nevertheless, while Skyler is not without flaws, her actions – feeding Walt tofu bacon, inquiring into his disappearances, or confronting Jesse – are entirely motivated by love and concern for her husband. In the fourth episode of the series, "Cancer Man" (Gilligan & McKay, 2008), Walt finally reveals his cancer diagnosis to Skyler, who is emotionally devastated to learn of her husband's impending death.

Despite this, as the series progressed and Skyler continued to confront Walt about his perfidious behavior, she was condemned by viewers for what they perceived to be hypocritical or nagging behavior (Cowlishaw, Gerlich, Gross, Pettis & Weiner, 2015; McKeown, Roads, Sundblad & Thomas, 2015). The character became the subject of numerous "hate boards" on AMC's website, with commenters criticizing Skyler as "a ball-and-chain, a drag, a shrew, an 'annoying bitch wife'" (Gunn, 2013, para. 7 – 8). Even today, years after the conclusion of the series, "there exists a particularly vitriolic brand of misogyny aimed at [Skyler] from a large

subsection of *Breaking Bad*'s [male] fans" (Joy, 2017, p. 2). This is also evident from a pair of

Facebook community groups, "Fuck Skyler White" and "I Hate Skyler White," that currently

possess more than 55,000 "likes" total. Anna Gunn (2013), the actress who portrays Skyler in

Breaking Bad, suggests that Skyler, being "the one character who consistently opposes Walter

and calls him on his lies [is], in a sense, his antagonist" (para. 5), which would naturally inspire

indignation from audiences. Sepinwall (2015) concurs with Gunn's statements, observing that:

> Because the revolutionary [Golden Age] dramas were mostly about men, and male anti-
>
> heroes at that, and because viewers tend to bond most with the main character of a show,
>
> there was a side effect to the era, where characters who on paper should be the
>
> sympathetic ones become hated by viewers for opposing the protagonist. And the greatest
>
> vitriol has been unfortunately saved for wives like [Skyler], who are viewed by some
>
> viewers as irredeemable bitches, no matter how poorly they're treated by their husbands
>
> (p. 389).

In *Breaking Bad*, Walt's poor treatment of Skyler eventually culminates in sexual assault,

which first occurs in the season two premiere, "Seven Thirty-Seven" (Roberts & Cranston,

2009). Walt returns home after surviving a tense drug deal and sees Skyler preparing breakfast in

the kitchen. He begins to tenderly kiss his wife, but becomes increasingly aggressive and pushes

Skyler against the refrigerator:

> The use of a handheld camera [portraying] his attempts at unbuckling his belt, lifting up
>
> Skyler's dressing gown and removing her underwear imbues the moment with a sense of
>
> urgency and directness that is consistent with the remainder of the sequence. Subsequent
>
> fleeting shots of him forcibly spreading her legs and moving her into a submissive
>
> position against a refrigerator not only underline the pace at which the events unfold but

also accentuate the limited time that Skyler has to prevent them from occurring (Joy,

2017, p. 5 – 6).

Walt finally relents after Skyler screams "Stop it!" and retreats to their outdoor swimming pool.

Skyler, believing her husband's behavior derived from anxiety regarding his cancer, approaches

Walt and tells him "I know that you're scared and you're angry and you're frustrated, and none

of this is fair. But you cannot take it out on me." However, Walt does not heed Skyler's words,

and this is not the last time Walt sexually assaults his wife. The conclusion of the season five

episode "Madrigal" (Gilligan & MacLaren, 2012) textually implies a marital rape, with Walt

crawling into bed with Skyler and escalating sexual foreplay while Skyler remains silent and

still. At this point Skyler is fully aware of Walt's recent activities as Heisenberg – which now

includes mass murder.

Laws in more than half of all American states do not fully protect wives from domestic

sexual violence (Clay-Warner, McMahon-Howard & Renzulli, 2009). This is a reflection of

patriarchal dominance in society, with laws crafted largely by men depriving women of power

and perpetuating their insubordination (MacKinnon 1989). Rape was originally codified as a

property offense, as wives were objectified as property belonging to their husbands; therefore,

wives could not be legally raped by their own husbands (Russell, 1990). Even as laws were

updated to reflect evolving social perspectives on rape, spousal rape is often marginalized or

dismissed due to such traditional views. Similarly, fans and television scholars routinely dismiss

both rape scenes in *Breaking Bad*, even though these incidents highlight "a pattern of abuse that

is consistent with studies on domestic abuse and sexual violence" (Joy, 2017, p. 7).

Dismissal of sexual misconduct is similarly a prominent concern within the context of

contemporary political discourse, as Trump has been accused of harassment and assault by

various women, many of whom first came forward during his presidential campaign. Trump has

continually denied such allegations, while his accusers have been subjected to harassment and ridicule by "a vocal fraction of his political supporters" (Tolentino, 2017, para. 8), many of whom questioned why the women only recently came forward. This resulted in the hashtag #WhyWomenDontReport trending on Twitter (Grinberg, 2016), where users recounted their own assaults and subsequent fear of being shamed and humiliated if they came forward. Unfortunately, such fears are not unfounded. Due to its patriarchal nature, American society largely favors male perpetrators in sexual assault cases (Harvey & Koss, 1991), with only a small minority ever sentenced to jail time (Harding, 2015). A similar hashtag, #WhyIDidntReport, began trending in September 2018 after Trump nominated Brett Kavanaugh, who had similarly been accused of sexual misconduct by three separate women, to the U.S. Supreme Court (Fortin, 2018). Among many viewers of *Breaking Bad* and supporters of Donald Trump, sexual assault is ignored and even rewarded, affirming that women are still commonly viewed and treated as second-class citizens.

While many fans ignored Skyler's sexual assault, they were quick to condemn her affair with her boss Ted Beneke, which occurs in the third season of the series (2010). After learning of Walt's involvement in the drug trade, Skyler informs Walt she wants a divorce, worried that his activities will endanger Walt Jr. and Holly. Walt refuses to sign the divorce papers or move out of the house, insisting that Skyler will not break apart their family, thus portraying *her* as the villain. Walt Jr. sides with his father, although neither parent admits to their son the true source of their contention: Walt's occupation as a drug manufacturer. Walt, cognizant of Skyler's "reluctance to defame him in front of their son … uses their children as leverage to ensure Skyler's silence by suggesting that if she tells anyone about his crimes, even her closest family, then it would not be his actions that destroyed their family, but hers" (Joy, 2017, p. 7). As revenge, Skyler initiates an affair with Ted, who has openly admitted his attraction to her. In the

episode "I.F.T." (Mastras & MacLaren, 2010), Walt feigns family normality during a family

dinner, but Skyler coldly informs him of her affair, leaving Walt shocked but unable to react in

front of their children. The title "I.F.T." is actually an abbreviation for her line "I fucked Ted."

Although Walt essentially holds Skyler prisoner in her own home, Skyler is able to a regain a

sense of autonomy through her affair:

> Skyler's hard-won victory provides her with some measure of feeling control over her
>
> own life, however fleeting that sensibility. Walter has prevented Skyler from voicing her
>
> own position or has failed to actually listen to her when she does. By having sex with
>
> Ted, Skyler has managed to command Walter's attention, making her presence *felt*
>
> (Pribram, 2014, p. 203) [emphasis original].

In online commentaries, Team Walt belittled and slut-shamed Skyler for her affair with

Ted. Within the context of the series, Walt believes that Skyler's affair has "destroy[ed] the

sanctity of their marriage, even as he fails completely to see that his own actions have

undermined the trust between the marital partners" (Pribram, 2014, p. 204). This is something

that the audience is clearly meant to interpret from textual evidence, although this was not

necessarily the case. During a study of fan engagement with the series, one viewer explained that

"I disliked Skyler so much because she cheated on her cancer-ridden husband. Walt was always

about family. Skyler violated that" (McKeown, Roads, Sundblad & Thomas, 2015, p. 152).

It is notable that marital infidelity is a common trait among contemporary *male* Golden

Age protagonists (Lincoln, 2013). This is not without precedent, as marital infidelity is not

uncommon in American marriages (Harvey, 1995; McKinney, Regan & Spreecher, 1998), with

men especially displaying more permissive attitudes towards engaging in an affair (Blumstein &

Schwartz, 1983; Ganon, Laumann, Michael & Michaels, 1994; Harrison, 2013; Thompson,

1984). Contemporary Golden Age series such as *The Sopranos* and *Mad Men* use their

protagonists' infidelity as a vessel to further critique masculine anxieties. If the wives of such

protagonists exhibit similar behavior, however, they are judged far more harshly, both within the

text and by its audiences. This is similarly accurate to historical trends: while women are less

likely to engage in extramarital affairs, those that do are judged and punished more harshly than

men (Buunk & Dijkstra, 2014; Collins & Coltrane, 1995; Lee & Reiss, 1988; McKinney, Regan

& Spreecher, 1998). Donald Trump himself has engaged in numerous extramarital affairs

(Taylor, 2018), including an alleged affair with adult film actress Stormy Daniels:

> In early 2018, [*The Wall Street Journal*] reported that Michael Cohen, President Trump's
>
> longtime personal lawyer and lawyer for the Trump Organization, paid $130,000 to
>
> Stormy Daniels (a.k.a. Stephanie Clifford) for her silence about [their] year-long intimate
>
> relationship. (Trump had married his current wife, Melania, in 2005, and their son,
>
> Barron, was born in 2006) (Farkas, 2018, p. 12).

While such controversy would be damaging to other political candidates, particularly

Republicans whose party has historically championed "family values" (Goren, 2005), a large

swath of America's White electorate managed to rationalize Trump's numerous affairs.[11] Many

voters simply "chalk[ed] it up to 'boys will be boys' behavior [or] a male thing" (Hafner, 2018,

para. 15 – 18). The fact that the sexual agency of men is celebrated while the sexual agency of

women is shamed, both in popular entertainment and politics, further reflects the power

imbalance in American society, with traditional societal expectations of women being their

submissiveness to men. To ensure the submissiveness of Skyler and other women who challenge

him in *Breaking Bad*, Walt engages in increasingly abusive behavior, including "gaslighting."

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[11] Trump denies having an affair with Daniels, although irrefutable evidence confirms that Cohen did make payments to Daniels (Farkas, 2018; Hafner, 2018).

Gaslighting as a Visual Motif

Judith Butler helps provide a theoretical basis for understanding the gender dynamics of *Breaking Bad*. Butler argues that "the categories of male-female and masculine-feminine are linguistic creations that have no essential qualities … the term masculine gets its meaning only in relationship to a concept thought of as feminine" (Borchers, 2006, p. 296). Because financially providing for one's family is considered a traditional masculine responsibility and gender role (Blackstone, 2003; Kimmel, 2013), failure to fulfill this role and accepting charity can inversely be seen as feminizing defeats. Although Walt continually rationalizes his actions to himself, Jesse, and others, claiming they are in their family's best interests, they are actually in pursuit of an abstract sense of masculine validation symbolized by financial affluence and superiority in Walt's newfound profession as a drug manufacturer.

Professional success and personal wealth are prominent markers of hegemonic masculinity (Clow, Ricciardelli & White, 2010). During his presidential campaign, Trump's purported success as a business tycoon was "one of his biggest selling points [to voters]" (Schein, 2018, para. 1), as it affirmed both his economic acumen and his status as an alpha male. In *Breaking Bad*, Walt did not enjoy success and wealth in his previous employment as an educator, factors that helped endear him to audiences similarly experiencing financial struggles and the resulting masculine anxiety. *Breaking Bad* is recognized as reflecting "the anxieties of [the] professional-managerial class in vulnerable economic times" (Larabee, 2013, p. 1131), which helped audiences affected or threatened by the recession to sympathize with Walt's actions as Heisenberg (Albrecht, 2016; Damico & Quay, 2016; Johnson, 2017; Paarlberg, 2013). Many blue-collar voters overlooked Trump's scandals and prejudicial leanings because they felt threatened and marginalized in the current political sphere and believed Trump would afford them greater economic opportunities. Cherrez (2017) asserts that the liberal, elite overclass is

represented in *Breaking Bad* by Gretchen and Elliott Schwartz, who similarly exploited Walt's

labors for their own financial gain:

> The show reserves a special place in its pantheon for two tech billionaires from a very
>
> different world. This is a world White could have been a part of, but he somehow missed.
>
> Here empowered people drive expensive cars, live in California, and practice
>
> philanthropy. Their world is good, and they want to make it better. They see themselves
>
> as both generous and enlightened. Envy and the bitter perception of hypocrisy are
>
> White's primary motivators. [He] invades their world. He bursts their bubble (para. 4 –
>
> 5).
>
> In the series' fifth episode, "Gray Matter" (Lin & Brock, 2008), Elliott and Gretchen

learn of Walt's cancer diagnosis and offer to pay for his treatment. Although Walt declines the

Schwartzes' offer, he tells Skyler that his former partners *are* paying his medical bills, while he

is paying them with drug money he earns with Jesse. In the season two episode "Peekaboo"

(Gilligan, Roberts, & Medak, 2009), after Gretchen learns that Walt is lying to Skyler about the

Schwartzes paying for his cancer treatments, she confronts Walt about his duplicity, but Walt

seethes at her:

<div align="center">

WALT
</div>

> What would you know about me, Gretchen? What would your
> presumption about me be, exactly? That I should go begging for
> your charity? And you waving your checkbook around like some
> magic wand is gonna make me forget how you and Elliott – how
> you and Elliott cut me out?

Gretchen is incredulous, countering that Walt left their relationship and Gray Matter on his own

accord. Walt's conversation with Gretchen is wholly revisionist, redirecting responsibility for his

own actions and downplaying his own agency. This is indicative of gaslighting, a form of

psychological manipulation. Abusers undermine their victim's sense of reality by questioning

their memories and perception of events. The purpose of gaslighting is to influence their victim

into adopting an alternate reality constructed by the abuser, a reality in which the abuser is not at

fault for their actions (Summit, 2014). As the argument progresses, Gretchen begins to cry,

betraying how hurt she is at Walt's accusations:

> GRETCHEN
> You left me. You left [my family] … Did I dream all of that?
> WALT
> That's your excuse to build your little empire on my work?
>
> GRETCHEN
> How can you say that to me? You walked away. You abandoned
> us, me, Elliott.
>
> WALT
> Little rich girl just adding to your millions.
>
> GRETCHEN
> I don't even know what to say to you. I don't even know where to
> begin. I feel so sorry for you, Walt.
>
> WALT
>
> Fuck you.

Although the Schwartzes offered Walt an alternative to cooking methamphetamine, a

deus ex machina that would have solved his financial problems, Walt *rejected* it, as he could not

accept charity without compromising his masculine pride. Although Walt's declaration of "Fuck

you" *sounds* like power, it is really emblematic of a flaccid individual, an insecure man

threatened and lashing out at those he believed wronged him. Although Walt believes Gretchen

and Elliot conspired to remove him from the very company he helped establish, Gilligan

explained in an interview following the conclusion of the series that Walt *did* leave Gray Matter

of his own volition and was motivated to do so because of his inferiority complex. While this

information is not explicit in the series itself, Gilligan states that it is alluded to through subtext:

> I think it was kind of situation where he didn't realize the girl he was about to marry was
>
> so very wealthy and came from such a prominent family, and it kind of blew his mind
>
> and made him feel inferior and he overreacted. He just kind of checked out … These

facts can be gleaned if you watch some of these scenes really closely enough, and you

watch them without too much of an overriding bias toward Walt and against Gretchen

and Elliott (Bradley, 2016, para. 9).

Throughout *Breaking Bad*, Walt gaslights Gretchen – and later Skyler, much more

frequently – by attempting to position himself as an underdog, underappreciated by the women

closest to him, rather than a rampant misogynist lashing out at any woman who questions his

actions or motives. Historically, American cultural texts promote "a metonymic relationship

between whiteness and professional acumen, especially regarding masculinity" (Watts, 2015, p.

16). This is due to a prevalent cultural belief in the United States that "White men succeed

because of innate competence, and fail only when faced with externally imposed barriers"

(Johnson, 2017, p. 16). Similarly, Walt believes that he was entitled to the wealth and

professional success enjoyed by Gretchen and Elliott, and was denied them solely by the barriers

placed by his former partners. Walt's anger in *Breaking Bad* echoes the anger expressed by many

White American men who feel cheated and displaced by modern society. Trump tapped into this

anger to cultivate popular support during his presidential campaign and has evinced such venom

himself. In December 2018, Trump tweeted "I am all alone (poor me) in the White House

waiting for the Democrats to come back and make a deal on desperately needed Border Security"

(Collinson, 2018, para. 6). Such rhetoric is indicative of an immature sense of despair towards

life's challenges, for which Trump, Walt, and the most toxic of their White male supporters have

limited strategies for coping and dealing with due to their history of privilege.

The Battle for Gender Dominance

Walt vs. Skyler. As the series progresses and Walt becomes further established as the

drug baron Heisenberg, accumulating both greater wealth and a higher body count, Walt's

behavior towards Skyler becomes increasingly dominating. Such traits are representative of toxic

masculinity, as are other "socially regressive male traits that serve to foster domination [and] the devaluation of women" (Kupers, 2005, p. 714). Although hegemonic masculinity and toxic masculinity are distinct concepts, it is not uncommon for them to overlap:

> Because the concept of hegemonic masculinity is based on practice that permits men's collective dominance over women to continue, it is not surprising that in some contexts, hegemonic masculinity actually does refer to men's engaging in toxic practices – including physical violence – that stabilize gender dominance in a particular setting (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 840).

Even after Skyler destroys the divorce papers and elects to stay with Walt, his behavior remains abusive. In the episode "Abiquiu" (Schnauz, Shiban & MacLaren, 2010), Skyler reminds Walt that under spousal privilege, spouses cannot be compelled to testify against each other. She then advises Walt to purchase a car wash where he previously worked, suggesting they can use it to launder his drug profits. Although Skyler has elected to remain with Walt, Walt takes steps to isolate her from her support systems by suggesting to Hank and Marie that Skyler is depressed and psychotic, derived from the affair she had with Ted.

Team Walt characterized Skyler as a hypocritical gold-digger for abetting Walt, suggesting the character only changed her stance on her husband's activities after realizing the scope of his wealth. However, Skyler's motives behind abetting Walt are in fact much more complex. While the current Golden Age of Television is driven by men "whose respective journeys into darkness embody shifting societal notions of masculinity and raise complex questions regarding moral agency … such similarly complex treatment has largely eluded female characters [who] are expected not to violate the same social norms as to preserve their likeability" (Wilson, 2017). Despite her initial unwillingness, Skyler ultimately violates the same social norms by laundering her husband's drug money, thus fitting the parameters of both a

criminal and an antiheroine. Its existence being a relatively recent development in popular

television, the antiheroine similarly displays questionable ethics and moral ambiguity,

challenging "culturally engrained social hierarchies and socio-sexual norms" (Akass & McCabe,

2017, p. 67). Oftentimes, "maternity [is] a motivating factor" in many of the antiheroine's

actions (Giomi, 2017, p. 112), and Skyler is no exception. In the season four episode "Cornered"

(Hutchison & Slovis, 2011), Skyler explains that she is staying with Walt solely for the benefit of

her children, explaining that "Someone has to protect this family from the man who protects this

family." Walt is amenable to this, wanting to preserve his family. He also believes that, in time,

he can turn Skyler back to his side:

> Walter conceives of Skyler's objections as existing only in the means he has taken to
>
> reach his end goal – providing financially for the family … Yet Walter's end goal, in
>
> addition to this means, is precisely that to which Skyler takes exception. For the couple
>
> contest different meanings of what it is to "protect" or "take care" of the family … Walter
>
> situates his role in taking care of the family in financial terms. In contrast, Skyler
>
> prioritizes guaranteeing the family's safety from physical [and] emotional harm or pain
>
> (Pribram, 2014, p. 204).

However, Skyler gradually recognizes "guaranteeing the family's safety" to be impossible. In

"Cornered," Skyler begs Walt to leave the drug trade, correctly surmising that rival drug barons

are seeking to eliminate him. When Skyler tells him "You're in danger," Walt turns around,

insulted at her insinuation. He begins to rant at her, with his voice gradually growing louder in

his anger:

<div align="center">

WALT

</div>

Who are you talking to right now? Who is it you think you see? …
No, you clearly don't know who you're talking to, so let me clue
you in. I am not in danger, Skyler, I *am* the danger! A guy opens
his door and gets shot, and you think that of me? No. I am the one
who knocks!

Cinematography functions as visual rhetoric (Fox, 2016), with the lighting and positioning of shots intended to convey specific information to audiences. The use of a handheld camera during Walt's assault of Skyler in "Seven Thirty-Seven" conveys such information, as does the framing of their confrontation in "Cornered." Skyler, because she is sitting down, is shot at a high angle, while Walt, standing above her, is shot at a low angle. In cinematography, "a low angle – where we look up at an actor, makes a character appear stronger and more powerful, while a high angle – looking down on an actor – weakens the character's impact" (Butler, 2012, p. 274). Thus, the camera emphasizes Walt's feelings of dominance over his wife, and what he perceives to be Skyler's inferiority in daring to question him.

Skyler refuses to back down and, determined to protect her children, stages a parasuicide in the season five episode "Fifty-One" (Catlin & Johnson, 2012), submerging herself in their pool during a dinner party, ostensibly to kill her herself. Hank and Marie offer to take in Walt Jr. and Holly while the Whites address their marital issues and Skyler's mental health – Skyler's goal all along. Although the plan succeeds, "during the ensuing confrontation between Skyler and Walter, he demands to know what other lengths she will go in to order to keep their children from him again. As he interrogates her, the use of a handheld camera shadows Walter closely as he hounds her around the bedroom, continually invading her personal space" (Joy, 2017, p. 7 – 8). Walt mocks and belittles his wife, demanding to know how she intends to separate him from his children:

> WALT
> What, are you going to run off to France? Are you going to close
> the curtains, change the locks? This is a joke. Come on, Skyler!
> You want to *take me on*? You want to take away *my children*?
> What's the plan?
>
> SKYLER
> I don't know! This is the best I could come up with, okay? I will
> count every minute that the kids are away from here – away from
> you – as a victory.

The notion of "victory" is key to understanding the conflict between Skyler and Walt. Skyler was derided and scorned by her husband and his online supporters for refusing to acknowledge her place within traditional gender hierarchy. Skyler dared to challenge her husband, to question his decisions, and call out his hypocrisy. This is akin to the reason that Hillary Clinton endured such continuous misogynistic and sexist ire during the 2016 presidential campaign. Not unlike Hillary Clinton, many viewed Skyler as a "nasty woman," a term coined by Trump during his third presidential debate with Clinton. After Clinton alluded to Trump's accusations of tax evasion when discussing social security, Trump immediately retorted that she was "such a nasty woman." This was the culmination of Trump's misogynistic attacks during the debate, after repeatedly interrupting Clinton and even threatening to arrest her (Plank, 2016). Trump and many of his supporters execrated Clinton simply because she was a woman who dared run for the position of highest leadership in a patriarchal society, a position that, for many, her sex immediately disqualified her from, a fact seemingly obvious to anyone besides Clinton herself.

Like Clinton, Skyler is "a persistent target for anger within what is arguably a wider culture of misogyny" (Joy, 2017, p. 2). Walt argued that Skyler was unappreciative of his efforts to provide for her and their children, while in truth Skyler predicted – accurately – that Walt's activities as Heisenberg would put their family in physical danger, a promotion that was realized when Jack and his gang betrayed Walt and executed Hank. Herein lies the tragedy of Skyler White: although "underlying melodramatic cues running throughout the series [reveal Skyler] to be an abused spouse fearfully trying to protect herself and her kids" (Mittel, 2015, p. 347), Team Walt refuses to acknowledge the character "as a victim of a ruthless husband *or* as a tragic heroine who attempted against all odds to protect her children and maintain her family" (McKeown, Roads, Sundblad & Thomas, 2015, p. 154). Instead, they simply perceive Skyler the

same way Trump's most bigoted supporters perceive Clinton: as a woman who doesn't know her place, who oversteps ironclad gender boundaries by daring to challenge a brave, righteous, and dedicated man.

Walt vs. Jane. Despite Walt's incredibly poor treatment of Skyler in *Breaking Bad*, arguably Walt's worst act towards a woman in the entire series – or at least the one most commonly highlighted by fans and critics (Stache, 2017) – occurs during season two (2009), when he allows the young Jane Margolis to die from an overdose. Jane is introduced in the episode "Breakage" (Walley-Beckett & Renck, 2009) as Jesse's new landlord, and the two soon begin dating. Despite begin a recovering drug addict, Jane eventually relapses and introduces Jesse to heroin. Due to Jesse's increasing drug abuse, Walt begins withholding his partner's share of the profits from their meth sales, much to Jesse's indignation. Jane learns of this and blackmails Walt, threatening to reveal his double-life to Skyler if he doesn't pay Jesse. In the penultimate episode of season two, "Phoenix" (Shiban & Bucksey, 2009), Walt delivers the money to Jesse and Jane. Before he leaves, Walt tells Jesse "Nice job wearing the pants," echoing Jesse's earlier mockery of Walt's relationship with Skyler. Both men subscribe to the popular societal notion that one's masculinity is defined by their dominance. Submissiveness, especially to a woman, invalidates this masculinity (Carranza & Prentice, 2002). Walt later has a change of heart and returns to Jesse's apartment, hoping to reconcile with his protégé. Walt discovers Jesse and Jane in bed, high on heroin and incapacitated. Walt shakes Jesse in an attempt to wake him, inadvertently knocking Jane from her side onto her back. Jane begins asphyxiating but Walt chooses not to intervene, resulting in her death.

Although Sony and AMC approved the script for "Phoenix," they expressed concern to Gilligan that audiences would lose empathy for Walt for failing to save Jane and therefore any interest in continuing the series (Blanche, 2017). However, the drop in viewers Sony and AMC

anticipated never occurred. Instead, fans on online message boards passionately defended Walt's

decision to let Jane die, forcing Gilligan to concede that "there are some people who, come hell

or high water, will never lose sympathy for Walt" (Sepinwall, 2015, p. 390).

A common argument from fans who defend Walt's decision was that he was acting out of

Jesse's best interests, seeing Jane as a negative influence that convinced the recovering Jesse to

relapse (Fowler, 2013). However, an alternative assessment endorsed by Gilligan is that Walt is

just an equally negative influence on Jesse, if not a greater one: whilst Jane truly loved her

boyfriend, Walt only saw Jesse as a means to an end, a weaker personality he could control and

manipulate. Later seasons support this theory, with Walt being as emotionally abusive to Jesse as

he is to Skyler, which ultimately lead him to betray Walt and join forces with Hank. Because

Walt had already returned Jesse's money, Jane had no reason or intention left to blackmail Walt,

which she acknowledged to Jesse. Therefore, "Phoenix" depicts Walt eliminating Jane not

because she posed any actual threat to his livelihood, but because she was his only true rival for

dominance over Jesse.

In *Breaking Bad*, femininity is recognized as a threat to traditional, and arguably

outdated, notions of masculinity (Bentham, 2017). To Walt, femininity must be tamed and

controlled so he can fulfill what he believes is his masculine mandate as a provider to his family,

whatever the means or cost, without interruption. Walt's attempts to control femininity are

exhibited through his domination of Skyler, gaslighting of Gretchen, and elimination of Jane.

Among Team Walt, Jane's death was celebrated, with the character having attracted considerable

vitriol for daring to stand up to Walt. Like Skyler, Jane was another "nasty woman" who refused

to conform to traditional gender hierarchy and submit to masculinity. This expected

submissiveness is symbolic of greater "social desire[s] to control women, to police their

movements and their bodies" (p. 177). During his presidency, Trump has aimed to fulfill such

desires, as evidenced by his administration "return[ing] to restrictive policies on abortion and

contraception [and] rolling back a rule introduced under his predecessor designed to close the

gender pay gap" (Siddiqui, 2018, para. 3 – 7). *Breaking Bad* foreshadows the cultural shift

Trump would enable, with its protagonist sharing a yearning with many American men to

combat feminism and hegemonize femininity under masculine power.

Metatextual Commentary on Exaggerated Masculinity

In "Ozymandias" (Walley-Beckett & Johnson, 2013, the antepenultimate episodes of the

series, Hank is murdered by the Neo-Nazi gang Walt had hired to eliminate Jesse. After she

learns of her brother-in-law's death, Skyler draws a knife on Walt, resulting in a physical,

potentially fatal struggle – the conclusion of many domestic violence cases (Campbell, 1995).

Walt Jr. calls the police, forcing Walt to flee. Walt later calls the house and, knowing that the

police are listening in on their conversation, accuses Skyler of being too stupid to understand or

appreciate his actions. Although Walt's rant is ostensibly that of an abusive husband lashing out

in anger at his wife, it is in fact an act of penance, intended to provide Skyler with plausible

deniability regarding her involvement in their money laundering schemes. The conversation also

displays metatextual elements regarding the more toxic elements of *Breaking Bad*'s fanbase

(Nussbaum, 2013), with Walt's language alluding to the typical comments found on anti-Skyler

message boards:

> WALT
> You were never grateful for anything I did for this family. "Oh no!
> Walt! Walt you have to stop! You have to stop this! It's immoral.
> It's illegal. Someone might get hurt." You're always whining and
> complaining about how I make my money – just dragging me
> down while I do everything … You stupid bitch.

This conversation is an exaggerated performance of masculinity. Walt is aggressive and

belligerent, thus framing "the discussion as being between an aggressor and his abused spouse,

[who] is coded in the readily intelligible role of victim" (Pettis, 2015, p. 185). However, Walt

begins to cry near the end of the phone call, thus betraying his hypermasculine performance and revealing his true feelings regarding his actions towards Skyler: guilt and regret. Ultimately:

> The [conversation] functions as an indictment not only of Walter's abusive actions but also of the viewer's own complicity in the development of his character throughout the entire series … In a lengthy monologue, Walter verbalizes the anger and hatred directed towards Skyler evident in a number of fan forums and on social networks (Joy, 2017, p. 8).

Walt explicitly verbalizes these feelings in the series finale, "Felina" (Gilligan, 2013). Evading the police, Walt meets with Skyler one last time. With Walt being revealed as Heisenberg, Skyler and the children have been forced to vacate their old home, now occupying a small, dingy apartment while Skyler works as a taxi driver: the only job she could obtain, given her family's notoriety. Walt provides Skyler with the location of Hank's burial site, hoping she can use this information to exonerate herself. Skyler begins to cry and Walt, observing the repercussions of his actions on his family, finally tells his wife:

<div align="center">

WALT
Skyler, all the things that I did, you need to understand…

SKYLER
If I have to hear, one more time, that you did this for the family –
WALT
I did it for me. I liked it. I was good at it. And, I was… really…I
was alive.

</div>

Skyler stares at her husband in shock, exhaling slowly, finally allowing herself to relax. This is an unexpected moment of catharsis for her, with Walt, having achieved clarity and self-knowledge, at last admitting what she knew all along: that he was motivated out of selfishness, not selflessness. Walt did not provide for his family by entering the drug trade but instead destroyed it in pursuit of a vague sense of masculine validation. Skyler was *right*, with all her concerns and warnings over the course of the series ultimately bearing fruit in the final episodes.

However, Team Walt and other "bad fans" (Nussbaum, 2013) that rationalize or ignore Walt's abuse of Skyler tend to ignore the events of the final episodes. Instead, they are primarily concerned with the exaggerated masculine performance of Heisenberg from the middle of *Breaking Bad*'s run, the drug baron who relishes in his newfound wealth and power, because the final episodes of the series reveal Heisenberg to be just that: a performance.

Ultimately, the exaggerated, macho masculinity that Walt displays as Heisenberg – and Trump displays as president – is not what is needed in today's world. It is depicted in *Breaking Bad* as isolating, self-destructive, and wholly outdated. Feminism is not a detriment to modern society, and women like Hillary Clinton are fully capable of exhibiting the same agency and autonomy as their masculine counterparts. This was recognized by one particular viewer in the *Breaking Bad* audience study (McKeown, Roads, Sundblad & Thomas, 2015), who commented that "I think the people who dislike Skyler, or the way she was portrayed, miss the point about what her character was really about. Skyler was … a strong, leading woman and we need more of these" (p. 154). Additionally, the widespread misinterpretation of *Breaking Bad*'s themes extends to its racial material.

Whiteness vs. the Other in *Breaking Bad*

Even before Walt is diagnosed with cancer in the pilot, it is established that he and Skyler are trying to save money for Walt Jr.'s college tuition. Because Walt's pay as a teacher is so poor, he is forced to take a second job at the local car wash, where he is humiliatingly forced to clean the cars of his own students. These cars are flashy and expensive, in contrast to the large and ugly Pontiac Aztek Walt drives. Bogdan Wolynetz, the owner of the car wash, continually belittles Walt as well. Bogdan is explicitly ethnicized, displaying a strong Eastern European accent and commenting on his Romanian heritage. Bogdan also displays a comic physical appearance, with Walt and Skyler derisively nicknaming Bogdan "Eyebrows" due to his large,

bushy eyebrows. Even in the pilot episode, Walt's contentious relationship with minorities is established, particularly those he views as beneath him.

Bruce Baum (2016) observes that race was never explicitly thematized in *Breaking Bad*. Instead, *Breaking Bad* largely focused on themes of class resentment, with Walt embodying the financial anxieties of the American middle class during the Great Recession (Pierson, 2014). However, while race and class are distinct categories of identity, it is not uncommon for them to overlap in studies related to social privilege (Weber, 1998). Class studies indicate that "differences between rich and poor, which result from particular ways of structuring the economy, are socially constructed as innate differences among people [and] used to rationalize or justify the unequal distribution of wealth and power that results from economic decisions made to perpetuate privilege" (Rothenberg, 2004, p. 10). Oftentimes, "poor" or "poverty" are equated with minority racial identities, such as Latino American (Junn & Masuoka, 2013), due to the perceived normativity of Whiteness in the United States (Fuss, 1989).

It is important to note that Whiteness and other categories of race are not biologistic (Rothenberg, 2004). Race is also distinct from ethnicity (Afshari & Bhopal, 2002), which refers to "shared cultural values and meanings such as relational styles, values, language, and customs" (Canenguez, Eisenhower, Lucchese & Suyemoto, 2014, p. 1036). Instead, race is "based on … socially, and certainly scientifically, outmoded beliefs about the inherent superiority and inferiority of groups based on racial distinctions" (Guess, 2006, p. 654). Therefore, race functions as "social categorization imposed on people related to physical appearance[s] for the purpose of making hierarchical power-based distinctions in social relations" (Canenguez, Eisenhower, Lucchese & Suyemoto, 2014, p. 1035 – 1036). Social expectations of race are constructed and maintained in large part through popular texts (Dates, 1993), especially in regard to underrepresented communities, such as Latino Americans:

At 12.5% of the population. Latinos constitute the largest racial/ethnic minority group in

the United States. Yet research suggests that they remain dramatically underrepresented

on television compared with real-world figures—typically comprising 1% to 3% of the

primetime television population (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2005, p. 110).

Despite this general lack of presence in popular television, many recurring characters in

Breaking Bad's ensemble are Latino – an accurate reflection of Albuquerque's racial

demographics.[12] In recognition of Latino culture's prominence in Albuquerque, several episodes

of *Breaking Bad* also have Spanish titles. Despite this, *Breaking Bad* does not necessarily deviate

from the historically stereotypical portrayals of Latino Americans on television:

> The relationship between race and masculinity has always been one vested with
>
> popularized stereotypes that … involve representational practices that classify and
>
> categorize members of another group, reducing those members to simplified and
>
> exaggerated characteristics, which are then communicated as fixed by nature (Park, 2015,
>
> p. 370).

Because of the particular story *Breaking Bad* is telling in the particular location it is set in, most

Latino characters occupy antagonistic roles connected to the drug trade and are portrayed as

gangsters or career criminals. Such enduring portrayals in popular media have helped to foster

the Latino stereotypes currently at the center contemporary political discourse and racial politics

– stereotypes that Trump has been accused of proliferating among his supporters.

Historical Portrayals of Latinos in American Entertainment

In popular entertainment, the stereotyping of minorities is motivated by the dominant

culture's recognition of these communities' increased agency, which they interpret as a

perceived threat to the status quo (Howe, 2014). Repeated exposure to such negative and

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[12] The 2010 United States census indicates that 46.7% of Albuquerque's population identified as
Hispanic or Latino (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012).

stereotypical portrayals of minority communities contributes to and maintains the societal

ubiquity of racial prejudice (Ford, 1997; Fujioka, 1999; Mastro & Tropp, 2004; Rada, 2000) by

influencing White audiences' opinions or understandings towards these communities, especially

when audiences lack personal interaction with minority individuals:

> Long-term exposure to television's stable set of selective messages ultimately shifts
>
> viewers' social perceptions towards the television version of reality, regardless of its
>
> accuracy. Within this framework, television is identified as a primary socializing force in
>
> society, providing knowledge about the social world and contributing to cultural
>
> constructions (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2005, p. 111 – 112).

Studies of Latino representation in film and television, which became more widespread

beginning in the 1980s (Howe, 2014), have identified several prominent stereotypes associated

with the community. These include "the comic or buffoon [that] is characterized by a heavy

accent, laziness [and] lack of intelligence (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2005, p. 111). Another

dominant media portrayal of Latino men, "particularly males of Mexican descent" (McFarland,

2011, p. 525), is that of the violent criminal (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2005). The fetishization

of violence is a key element of macho masculinity (Scharrer, 2001), a masculine model common

among lower-class communities such as urban gangs (Pyke, 1996), where its display "functions

as an effort to establish and assert masculine identity and self-esteem in spite of low economic

standing" (Wilson, 2018, p. 122). A majority of the Latino characters in *Breaking Bad* displays

toxic traits of macho masculinity, Steve "Gomie" Gomez being one notable exception. Gomie,

Hank's Latino partner and best friend, is portrayed as "quiet and nurturing, not exhibiting any of

the machismo often associated with [other] Latino characters" (Howe, 2014, p. 87). Ultimately,

Gomie is the sole wholly positive male Latino character in *Breaking Bad*.

As recognized by Andrew Howe (2014), "media portrayals of Latinos, which ha[ve] long been tinged with racism, [often exhibit] specific stereotypes associated with drug culture" (p. 98). Such depictions serve to portray the Latino community in its entirety as dangerous Others, which has stoked the racial fears Trump has played to during his campaign and presidency.

"Bad Hombres" and Latinos as Other in *Breaking Bad*

The Other is a philosophical concept where hegemonic social groups discriminate against individuals whose appearance or identity violates their own accepted norms, relegating them to a subordinate social category (Miller, 2008). Communities that have been "historically constituted as 'other' [include] non-Europeans, people of color, women, lesbians, [and] gays" (Ducille, 1990, p. 103). Such communities are othered due to what the dominant group perceives as the inherent inferiority of their being:

> Othering [encompasses] discursive processes by which powerful groups, who may or may not make up a numerical majority, define subordinate groups into existence in a reductionist way which ascribe problematic and/or inferior characteristics to these subordinate groups. Such discursive processes affirm the legitimacy and superiority of the powerful and condition identity formation among the subordinate (Jensen, 2011, p. 65).

Dominant social groups often exaggerate what they perceive to be the negative characteristics of these Others, portraying them as too alien, foreign, and ultimately dangerous to be accepted by mainstream society. In *Breaking Bad*, the most prominent Latino characters all conform to such negative characterization.

Breaking Bad's initial major antagonist is Tuco Salamanca, a local drug kingpin Walt and Jesse attempts to sell their meth to. Tuco is psychotic, presumably due to his own meth use. Specific examples of Tuco's insanity include "believ[ing] he can see the future with his special

mental powers, and argu[ing] frequently at the urgings of an extreme paranoia" (Cowlishaw, 2015, p. 77). Howe (2014) observes that "Gilligan set the baseline with the most outrageous character possible" (p. 90), with Tuco being an exaggerated example of the Other, even lashing out at his own henchmen and using physical violence to guarantee their subordination. In the season one finale, "A No-Rough-Stuff-Type Deal" (Gould & Hubnter, 2008), Tuco even beats one of his henchmen to death for an innocuous comment.

While Tuco could be construed as Other based solely on his race (and also psychosis), the twin brothers Marco and Leonel Salamanca, introduced in the season three premiere, "No Más" (Gilligan & Cranston, 2010), represent a much more extreme example of the Other. Marco and Leonel are cousins of Tuco, and travel to Albuquerque from Mexico to avenge Tuco's death after he is killed in a firefight with Hank. Erroneously believing Walt to be responsible for Tuco's death, Marco and Leonel, collectively known as "the Cousins," proceed to hunt Walt, planning to torture him to death. In the cold open[13] of "No Más," the Cousins' debut scene, they crawl, fully clothed, along a desert road to a candlelit shrine to Santa Muerte, the Mexican deity that personifies Death. They make an offering to Santa Muerte, represented in the shrine by a skull, so that she will bless and aid their pursuit of Walt.

This surreal scene establishes the Cousins' role in the series as harbingers of death. They are seemingly detached from humanity, being reminiscent of the emotionless Terminator portrayed by Arnold Schwarzenegger.[14] The Cousins display mechanical, austere physicality and permanent scowls, and almost never speak. Additionally, their typical outfits consist of sharkskin suits and cowboy boots tipped with silver skulls. Altogether, the Cousins display a threatening

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[13] In television terminology, a cold open refers to the opening scene of an episode, set before the series' title sequence (LoBrutto, 2018).
[14] As portrayed in the *Terminator* franchise, Terminators are unstoppable killing machines, cyborgs incapable of exhibiting emotion and programmed only to kill – a just comparison to the Cousins.

presence, and many of their scenes are marked by extreme violence. In "No Más," while being smuggled in a truck across the U.S.-Mexico border, another immigrant recognizes the Cousins, who proceed to kill everyone in the truck – including a pregnant woman – and set the vehicle ablaze. A flashback[15] in "I.F.T" shows the Cousins beheading a DEA informant with an axe, and later in the episode they are implied to have murdered an old woman to steal her car. Finally, in the episode "One Minute" (Schnauz & MacLaren, 2010), the Cousins attempt to murder Hank, having learned that he personally killed Tuco. Hank is only saved due to the intervention of Gus Fring, who called him a minute prior to the Cousins' attempted assassination to deliver an anonymous warning.

Gus is introduced late in *Breaking Bad*'s second season. Originally emigrating from Chile in the 1980s, Gus has since established himself as the most powerful methamphetamine distributor in the Southwestern United States. Unlike Tuco or the Cousins, Gus operates discreetly, with the DEA entirely unaware of his criminal connections. Publicly, Gus is a prominent community figure, owning the popular Los Pollos Hermanos fast food restaurant chain and involved in charitable activities. However, this affable persona is also a product of performativity, with Gus' friendly exterior hiding a ruthless and Machiavellian personality. Gus' vast influence, legions of henchmen, and double life as a respected public figure are all markers of his role in *Breaking Bad* as a modern-day super villain, as is his own propensity for extreme violence. In "Box Cutter" (Gilligan & Bernstein, 2011), the season four premiere, Gus kills his henchman Victor by slashing his throat, angry with Victor for failing a mission. Gus is implied to have even conducted such displays of violence on a national scale. During a flashback in the episode "Hermanos" (Catlin, Mastras & Renck, 2011), Hector Salamanca, a cartel enforcer and

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[15] In film and television, a flashback "is a portion of a story that is narrated out of chronological order, switching from story information being told in the present to [story information] that occurred before" (Utterson, 2005, p. 251).

the equally psychotic grandfather of Tuco and the Cousins, mockingly refers to Gus as "Grand

Generalissimo." This implies that Gus served under the regime of Augusto Pinochet, the fascist

dictator of Chile, before his emigration – Pinochet's dictatorship was recognized for its (often

violent) human rights violations. Hank notes that the DEA are unable to find any record of his

existence prior to his arrival from Chile and suggests that "Gustavo Fring" is actually an

assumed name.

The violent murderers that almost exclusively account for Latino representation in

Breaking Bad can be connected to Trump's prejudiced rhetoric during his presidential campaign.

Tapping into feelings of marginalization among working class White Americans, Trump largely

campaigned on a platform of immigration reform, promising to construct a barrier wall along the

U.S.-Mexico border to curb illegal immigration and protect American jobs, a proposal that

amassed popular support. Trump's rhetoric towards the Latino community was overgeneralized,

effectively Othering them by portraying the entire population as violent criminals and drug

pushers. Even during his initial campaign announcement, Trump argued that Mexican

immigrants were responsible for an influx of drugs and crime in the country:

> When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best … They're sending people
>
> that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing
>
> drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists […] They're sending us not the right
>
> people (Parnass, 2015, para. 15 – 16).

Trump's comments generated significant controversy, as there is no empirical data to support the

notion that there is any correlation between crime and undocumented immigration (Ye Hee Lee,

2015). Nevertheless, the portrayal of Latinos in *Breaking Bad* largely conforms to the

exaggerated threat of the Other that Trump warns his supporters of. Gus and the Salamancas are

all habitual murderers, with the Cousins even seen entering the country illegally, thus validating

the necessity of the proposed barrier wall. They are what Trump calls "bad hombres," another divisive phrase he coined during the third presidential debate: Latino men responsible "for drug epidemics around the U.S," with Trump pledging to "get 'em out [if elected president]" (Causey, 2016, para. 3). Latino Americans universally criticized the label "bad hombres" as divisive. In particular, reporter Carolina Moreno (2016) argued that Trump's rhetoric was "meant to prompt voters to link the entire Latino population with something negative … regardless of immigration status or place of birth" (para. 9). In *Breaking Bad*, Walter White, despite embodying the toxic sociopolitical assumptions of White supremacist ideologies, is validated in the extreme violence he inflicts upon Latino bodies because of how they are Othered within the program as Trump's "bad hombres," with minimal nuance or subtlety afforded in their portrayals.

Walter White and Mythic Whiteness

Television scholars observe that several contemporary Golden Age dramas, particularly *The Wire*, offer complex and nuanced storylines exploring the socioeconomic factors that promote macho gang masculinity amongst lower-class minority communities (Chambers & Waldron, 2012; Cooper, 2012). However, such introspection is sparse in *Breaking Bad*. As a side effect of the particular story it is telling – Walter White's literal descent into criminality and figurative descent into darkness – *Breaking Bad* largely presents Latino gangsters as mere obstacles its *White* criminal protagonist has to outmaneuver and overcome. Such phenomenon serves to maintain established stereotypes towards Latino men:

> The relationship between race and masculinity has always been one vested with popularized stereotypes that … involve representational practices that classify and categorize members of another group, reducing those members to simplified and exaggerated characteristics, which are then communicated as fixed by nature (Park, 2015, p. 370).

As depicted in *Breaking Bad*, "people of color are overrepresented and prone to violence. The series does not bother to explore the paths of the latter into the drug world; it takes as a given that we would find nonwhites in this milieu" (Baum, 2016 p. 167). Therefore, their deaths from gun violence could also be construed as normative, both within the text by Walt and by audiences scrutinizing the text. One such death is that of Christian "Combo" Ortega. In *Breaking Bad*'s second season (2009), Walt and Jesse decide to distribute Blue Sky themselves and form a crew composed entirely of Jesse's closest friends, including Combo, who is loyal but unintelligent. Besides overtly malicious depictions such as the gangster, the Latino "also often appears as cowardly, apathetic, and dormant" (Limon, 1993, p. 3), a character description that could be applied to Combo. Walt insists on being a "silent partner" in the operation, cooking the meth while Jesse, Combo, and the others sell it as they see fit. Despite Walt's firm proclamation that he would not intervene in the distribution, he becomes increasingly commanding and authoritative. In particular, Walt pushes Jesse to expand their territory and customer base to increase profits. Although Jesse ultimately agrees to Walt's demands, he warns his partner of potential reprisals. These reprisals arrive in the episode "Mandala" (Mastras & Bernstein, 2009), where rival Latino dealers enlist a child to fatally shoot Combo after he attempts to sell Blue Sky in their territory. When a tearful Jesse informs Walt that Combo is dead, an unmoved Walt simply asks, "which one is he?"

Unlike Jesse, who mourns the death of his friend, Walt does not care that Combo is dead – his only concern is that business will suffer. Despite Jesse's inner social circle being fully developed in *Breaking Bad*, his sole friend eliminated in Albuquerque's drug trade is Latino, thus supporting the notion that people of color are inclined towards violence. Combo, a relatively simpleminded and Latino man, is not only entirely disposable but also *expected* to expire in such a violent incident. Walt's apathetic response suggests that he himself maintained such

expectations. In contrast, viewers are invited to perceive that Walt, characterized by both his Whiteness and intelligence, is entirely above such ignominious and petty street criminality. Unfortunately, the notion of "mythic whiteness" is a reoccurring element across numerous popular culture texts, such as the 2002 drama film *8 Mile*. The protagonist of *8 Mile*, a White rapper named B-Rabbit, struggles to succeed in Detroit's hip-hop scene, a city and genre dominated by Black bodies.[16] B-Rabbit is portrayed as uniquely gifted and lyrically superior to his Black peers, thus suggesting a mythic, superior Whiteness (Watts, 2005). Similar to *8 Mile*, *Breaking Bad* is a narrative of mythic Whiteness, where a White individual encounters and ultimately battles alien, Othered forces, all in pursuit of a goal symbolizing his "immanent manhood" (Johnson, 2017, p. 16). Such a description can also be applied to Trump's presidential campaign and eventual victory, due to Trump defining his masculine persona through his conflict with Othered minorities:

> Despite the indignation of some over Trump's insulting of and lying about Mexicans, Muslims, Jews, [and others], he won the US presidential election. He won in part by tapping into a different sort of moral outrage … over perceived nostalgic losses of white masculinity as power in the United States (McGranahan, 2017, p. 4).

Throughout *Breaking Bad*'s first four seasons, Walt reasserts the power of White masculinity through his violent domination of Latino individuals such as Gus. *Breaking Bad* thus functions as a White power fantasy that neatly coincides with the White supremacist leanings of Trump's most bigoted supporters, particularly the alt-right.

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[16] *8 Mile* is inspired by the life story of White rapper Eminem, who plays B-Rabbit in the film. Although Eminem is now recognized as one of the best-selling and most influential artists in hip-hop, Eric King Watts (2005) suggests that *8 Mile* portrays Eminem "as both racially distinctive and as possessing universal commercial appeal" (p. 189).

Walter White as a Skinhead and Alt-Right Figure

The final season of *Breaking Bad* is the sole season of the series in which the main antagonists are not Latino. In this season, Walt establishes a working relationship with a local Neo-Nazi gang, and they carry out several assignments at his behest, often involving clandestine assassinations. At this point in the series, Walt has shaved himself bald due to losing hair from his chemotherapy. This is a polysemic element of *Breaking Bad*, with the visual imagery of the bald Walter White noteworthy as a rhetorical invitation. Viewers may be influenced to associate Walt with White supremacy, as shaven heads are closely associated with neo-Nazi skinhead culture and the far right. Paul Elliot Johnson (2017) asserts that Walt "resembl[ing] a skinhead" (p. 17) is an intentional creative choice, serving as a visual allusion to the current depths of his depravity as Heisenberg. However, it may also be interpreted as an endorsement of White supremacy.

The Neo-Nazis are notably far less Othered than their Latino counterparts in the drug trade, despite their White supremacist leanings being explicitly conveyed to viewers. Jack and his men have prominent swastika tattoos on their neck and hands, with Jack also displaying tattoos on his knuckles that spell out "skinhead." Tattoos are a form of visual rhetoric that can also express "radical assertions of self [and] repressed desire" (Harlow, 2008, p. 187 – 193), thus reflecting the ideological identification of its bearer. Ideological identification encompasses the sociopolitical leanings that form an essential aspect of one's identity (Jessee, 2012). Thus, the gang's tattoos visually demonstrate that they subscribe to the prejudiced racial ideology of neo-Nazism and the alt-right. Despite this, Jack and his gang never actually verbalize such ideology, save a single remark by Jack's lieutenant Kenny in the episode "Gliding Over All" (Walley-Beckett & MacLaren, 2012) about not "mix[ing] blood with chuntaros." Instead, they are portrayed as working-class criminals simply earning a living the only way they know how.

Unlike the psychotic Tuco or the selectively mute Cousins, Jack's gang possesses much more grounded personalities, as was observed by some television reviewers. For instance, Seth Amitin (2013) writes:

> They weren't vindictive or mean-spirited … Jack was a despicable human being, but still the kind of guy you'd want on your side. They were all buddies with beers and jokes (para. 8).

> In *Breaking Bad*, Latino criminals such as Tuco, the Cousins, and Gus are explicitly

coded as Othered, while Jack's gang of Neo-Nazis is noticeably more grounded and normalized. This predicted a trend that would define the 2016 presidential election in the last presidential election: the mainstreaming and normalization of extreme racist ideology in American sociopolitical discourse. The mainstreaming of the alt-right was facilitated by a "discourse of anxiety about traditional white masculinity" (Kelly, 2017, p. 69), specifically the perceived loss of White power to women and minorities:

> Nostalgia for a mythic past of fixed gender dynamics and racial homogeny is an important underlying tenet of popular social conservatism, but alt-right discourse brings this imagery to the unmissable foreground, while fusing such nostalgia with an explicit rhetoric of victimhood and betrayal (p. 73).

One element of this proposed victimhood is the threat of Latinos entering the country illegally and stealing employment opportunities from working class Americans. Although many Trump supporters were ostensibly concerned about preserving their wages and safeguarding themselves from layoffs, their rhetoric of victimhood has warped into a rhetoric of hate. Walter White is a televisual progenitor of this zeitgeist, with his quest to symbolically reclaim his masculinity and provide for his family manifesting in racial violence against Latinos that audiences defended, rationalized, and cheered for.

Resonance Between *Breaking Bad* and Trumpian Rhetoric

In the field of media studies, "educators and social critics can shed critical light on how [popular] texts work pedagogically to legitimize some meanings, invite particular desires, and exclude others" (Giroux, 2001, p. 25). Critics and media scholars popularly describe *Breaking Bad* as an allegory for the financial fears facing the American middle class in the wake of the Great Recession (Larabee, 2013; Johnson, 2017). An allegory is defined as "a rhetorical form in which an entertaining surface narrative is used to mask a strong ideological message," which audiences identify "through a series of metaphorical cues" (Milford, 2017, p. 606). Allegories are well suited to visually mediated rhetoric, as they invite audiences to perceive symbols in specific ways (Inabinet, 2012). Claire Sisco King (2011) explains that this allows audiences to engage with complex subjects and topics "buffered by … safe and distant representation" (p. 15). However, it is suggested that narrative allegories may also serve as a double-edged sword:

> Allegories may offer pathways for viewers and critics to maintain plausible deniability regarding their own morally suspect ideological investments. [They] create connections between audience members in which the substitutive rather than representative character of the narrative effectively conceals how the allegory might unite audiences at the level of shared assumptions. This unity confounds expectations one might have for an audience based on conventional political assumptions. Investment in toxic socio-political assumptions is one such shared element (Johnson, 2017, p. 15).

In *Breaking Bad*, these "toxic socio-political assumptions" manifest in the blatant depictions of misogyny, racism, and White privilege exhibited by Walter White. When considering the context of the rising national visibility and ultimate candidacy of Donald Trump, *Breaking Bad* appears to have struck a tuning fork that we can interpret through conventional rhetorical criticism.

In the United States, American manhood is "less about the drive for domination and more

about the fears of others dominating us … throughout American history American men have been afraid that others will see us as less manly, as weak, timid, frightened" (Kimmel, 1996, p. 6), and Walt is certainly no exception. The birth of Heisenberg is motivated by Walt's insecurities, inferiority complex, and sense of personal failure compared to his peers, including the wealthy Schwartzes. Although Gilligan's commentary indicates *Breaking Bad* "may be read to condemn Walt's monstrous ego and his understanding that white men are entitled to professional success … fans and critics often focused on the humanity of Walt as a timeless case which testified to how traumatic injury to the white man is paradigmatic to the human condition" (Johnson, 2017, p. 25). Despite Gilligan's intended goal, the masculine anxiety of Walter White invites us to consider if *Breaking Bad* has excited and contributed to the current masculinist movement in the United States.

Despite the societal ubiquity and power of Whiteness – specifically White masculinity – in the United States, many White American citizens feel that their identity is under threat by the increasing autonomy of women and minorities, with Alastair Bonnett (2000) suggesting that "the fragility of whiteness is a direct product of the extraordinary claims of superiority made on its behalf" (p. 38). The perceived threats to White masculinity motivated many Americans to vote for Trump, who presented himself as a staunch supporter of "traditional" White masculinity. Such idealized masculinity is "based on nostalgia for a time that has never existed, and defined largely on the basis of the absence of modern, 'degenerate' influences" (Kelly, 2017, p. 69), such as feminism and multiculturalism:

> The state of emergency faced by contemporary men has emerged as a response to the perceived loss of patriarchal prestige … Privileged cultural practices [such as] the masculine burden of financial responsibility [and] workplace superiority, as the story goes, have all been assaulted in so many ways by feminists, liberals, and Hollywood that

the resulting post-patriarchy of the twenty-first century has left men adrift and ridiculed (Landrum 2015, p. 95 – 96).

Like Walt in *Breaking Bad*, many American men are "in full scale retreat, [figuratively] heading off to rediscover their wild, hairy, deep manhood" (Kimmel, 1996, p. 6). This idealized manhood is symbolized by a primal warrior mentality on the verge of extinction in what these men perceive to be an increasingly feminized society. The birth of "Heisenberg" represents the emergence of Walt's own warrior mentality and his symbolic rebirth as a "true man." Walt's Heisenberg persona quickly comes into conflict with Skyler, who was mocked, derided, and scorned on social media. Cherrez (2017) even mocks Skyler as Walt's "feminist wife" (para. 3) despite Skyler never actually explicitly verbalizing feminist ideology at any point in the series, demonstrating the immediate venom that even the very notion of feminine agency conjures in the age of Trump. Anna Gunn (2013) suggests that the reason her character evoked such hostility from these fans was because she was not portrayed as subordinate to her husband, even despite his criminality:

> I finally realized that most people's hatred of Skyler had little to do with me and a lot to do with their own perception of women and wives. Because Skyler didn't conform to a comfortable ideal of the archetypical female, she had become a kind of Rorschach test for society, a measure of our attitudes toward gender (para. 13).

Gilligan has criticized Team Walt, labeling them as "misogynists, plain and simple" (Brown, 2013, para. 22), although Jason Mittel (2015) suggests that "Hating Skyler is a significant part of *Breaking Bad*'s cultural articulation and thus an aspect of its gender politics as articulated, if not textually intended or justified" (p. 348). Stuart Joy (2017) concludes that while *Breaking Bad* never actually endorsed Walt's abusive behavior towards his wife, "the series was inclined to spend more time devoted to Walter's downward spiral into a life of crime" (p. 3).

Similarly, while *Breaking Bad* does not explicitly communicate any racist messages regarding

the Latino community, Gus and the Salamancas continue the tradition of "villainous

representations of Hispanic men" in television, including "sexually threatening males, criminals,

gang members, drug dealers, and illegal aliens" (Larson, 2006, p. 58). Baum (2016) argues that

Breaking Bad, despite "hav[ing] transformed the television landscape" (p. 166), contains

problematic racial material that resonates with modern political culture:

> The show's premise reflects and buttresses the normalization of whiteness. With respect
>
> to the role of the white problem in the context of current US racial politics, [*Breaking*
>
> *Bad*'s] representations of and silences about race and racism are commonplace reflections
>
> of prevalent American attitudes … that reaffirm a white perspective on opportunity,
>
> achievement, and the American dream. This perspective conceals the full effect of
>
> American racism (p. 168).

Historically, popular television series such as *Breaking Bad* have portrayed Latino

individuals as the "bad hombres" described by Trump (Howe, 2014; Larson, 2006), thus

validating his prejudiced rhetoric to his supporters. Despite this, Trump has repeatedly refuted

accusations of racism, describing the supposed correlation between crime and Latino

immigration as an uncomfortable truth while remaining silent about the larger number of crimes

committed by White Americans (Fisher, 2016). Trump's supporters justify his hostile rhetoric

towards this community and others as ignoring political correctness and simply "telling it like it

is" (Shafer, 2017, p. 3). Cherrez (2017) likens Trump to Walt himself in how their "deeds tear

asunder one politically correct temple after another, leaving them in ruins" (para. 6). To Cherrez,

Walter White and Donald Trump both represent a nostalgic return to the masculine prestige of

the Reagan era, where men were confident in their masculinity and self-identity, represented

through macho physicality and patriarchal responsibility (Watson, 2007). While Cherrez is

correct in that Walt and Trump display certain similarities, these similarities are rooted in how both men distort and pervert the ideals of the Reagan era. Walt and Trump both display outsized egos, exaggerated masculine personae, and – most notably – poor relations with alternatively gendered or racialized individuals, particularly women and Latinos.

CHAPTER 4. TALKING RED: FAR RIGHT RHETORIC IN *THE WALKING DEAD*

Background

Zombie fiction, rooted in rural Haitian culture and folklore, describes the reanimation of

corpses through supernatural or fictional scientific methods (Davis, 1988). William Buehler

Seabrook's 1929 travelogue *The Magic Island*, which sensationalized his experiences with local

Haitian voodoo cults, introduced the zombie concept to Western popular culture (Russell, 2014).

Decades later, George A. Romero's classic 1968 film *Night of the Living Dead* cemented the

popular notion of zombies as mindless carnivorous beings that travel in herds (Bishop, 2010;

Wetmore, 2011). It is this version of the zombie that is portrayed in *The Walking Dead*, adapted

from the comic book series created by Robert Kirkman[17] and Tony Moore. The series depicts the

aftermath of a zombie apocalypse, in which pockets of survivors struggle to reestablish

civilization. Although the comic was a popular success, it was the blockbuster ratings of the

television series that birthed a multimedia franchise[18] and truly launched *The Walking Dead* into

cultural consciousness.

The primary protagonist of *The Walking Dead*'s first nine seasons is Rick Grimes, a

Georgian deputy sheriff who is partnered with his best friend, Shane Walsh. After he is wounded

in a shootout with bank robbers, a comatose Rick is hospitalized. When Rick regains

consciousness, he discovers that civilization has been devastated by a zombie plague.

Determined to find his wife Lori and son Carl, Rick eventually tracks his family to the outskirts

of Atlanta, where they have joined a small community of survivors led by Shane. Rick ultimately

usurps Shane as the group's leader and pledges to lead the survivors to a safe location. Major

story arcs in the series include the group's attempts to settle at a remote farm, a dilapidated

---

[17] Kirkman is also an executive producer of the television adaptation.

[18] *Talking Dead*, a live aftershow featuring cast and crew from *The Walking Dead*, premiered in 2011, and a prequel series, *Fear the Walking Dead*, premiered in 2015. Numerous tie-in novels, web series, and videogames have also been released.

prison, and finally the walled settlement of Alexandria. Simultaneously, Rick must combat

marauders, rival communities, and even attempted insurrections, including one led by Shane.

As of 2019, *The Walking Dead* boasts the highest total viewership of any cable series

(Kim, 2016), and is thus commercially the most successful horror program in television history.

Horror texts traditionally exhibit patriarchal ideology, specifically "the manifestation and

institutionalization of male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension

of male dominance over women in society in general" (Lerner, 1986, p. 239). Although horror

narratives may superficially question or subvert institutions, "the return to normalcy at the end of

many horror films is often a reinscribing of white, male, patriarchal authority" (Wetmore, Jr.,

2011, p. 3). The specification of *White* male authority is important, as White patriarchy has

served as the dominant influence in American society since the country's founding and

establishment (Zeskind, 2014).

While genres are defined as a broad category of entertainment (Butler, 2012), subgenres

function as subordinates with these greater categories. For example, zombie fiction is a subgenre

of horror. Unlike its parent genre, however, zombie fiction often contrasts conservative

ideologies with more progressive – or even radical – alternatives (Browning, 2011), with texts

frequently depicting the desolation of the patriarchal status quo:

> [Zombie fiction] presents a world in which all forms of order and traditional patriarchal
>
> power have been destroyed, leaving the small groups of survivors to reassemble
>
> themselves into new kinds of communities. This has made the zombie genre one of the
>
> most politically invigorating narrative paradigms in genre fiction, as it has expressed a
>
> sustained critique of conservative ideology and the political status quo … This subversive
>
> aspect of zombie narratives is frequently expressed via explicit attacks on characters and
>
> institutions associated with traditional patriarchal power (Hassler-Forest, 2011, p. 345).

Such institutions commonly include the military and the government. When facing their

ruination, survivors are free to establish communities with radically different sociopolitical

power structures than their predecessors. Therefore, zombie texts frequently ask audiences to

consider "what worlds are constructed after the initial attack that brings on the zombie

apocalypse [and] what power dynamics continue" (Brooks, 2014, p. 462).

Despite this, *The Walking Dead*'s overarching narrative neglects the subversive elements

characteristic of zombie fiction and instead "propagat[es] the Western hierarchical framework of

privileging the experiences of the white male" (Brooks, 2014, p. 461), with White men alone

wielding access to power in the series. The treatment of minority and female characters in *The*

Walking Dead thus preserves the historical status of White masculinity, primarily embodied in

the series by Rick, as the ruling group in American society. Therefore, within the context of

current American sociocultural realities, does *The Walking Dead*'s emphasis on White male

dominance resonate with prominent political trends and messages?

Because its unprecedented commercial success imparts the series with considerable social

influence, there is significant research potential in linking *The Walking Dead*'s presentation of

White masculine dominance over women and minorities to Trump's activities in the American

political arena. Besides his continually misogynistic and prejudiced rhetoric, Trump "barks in

sentence fragments; he recycles the same words and phrases over and over; he boasts; he bullies;

he creates warlike antagonism; he always has to be Number One, bigger-than and better-than"

his opponents (Lakoff, 2017, p. 598), thus cultivating an exaggerated masculine persona centered

on dominance and aggression, a persona similarly celebrated in *The Walking Dead*. More

importantly, in Trump's public appearances and *The Walking Dead*, these personae are explicitly

coded as White. Communication professor Stephen Olbrys Gencarella argues that the

"remarkable lack of diversity in [*The Walking Dead*'s] writers and showrunners … manifests

very clearly in themes that resonate with anxious white men and fascists" (Collins, 2016, para. 13), which has cultivated a significant overlap in viewers of *The Walking Dead* and supporters of Donald Trump.

Regressive Conception of Gender

Demetrakis Z. Demetriou (2001) divides hegemonic masculinity into internal and external hegemony. Internal hegemonic masculinity describes topics relating to "hegemony over other masculinities" (p. 341), while external hegemonic masculinity describes masculinity's ascendancy over women and other subordinated communities. Although internal hegemonic masculinity is normative in that it "embodie[s] the currently most honored way of being a man" (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 832), no single masculine identity is regarded as the hegemonic standard:

> There is [no] consensus among all men and women in any national setting about the ideal man. Indeed, hegemonic masculinity often stands in contrast to other class-, race- and sexuality-based masculinities. Nonetheless, hegemonic masculinity remains a standard – whether reviled or revered – against which other masculinities compete or define themselves (Nagel, 1998, p. 247).

Scholars have often bemoaned the frequency that "hegemonic masculinity is … used in the singular" (Jefferson, 2002, p. 71). Nevertheless, there are several reoccurring elements of idealized masculinity across cultures, such as "impregnat[ing] women, protect[ing] dependents from danger, and provision kith and kin . . . We might call this quasi-global personage something like 'Man-the-Impregnator-Protector-Provider'" (Gilmore, 1990, p. 223). Such masculine images are "naturalized in the form of the hero and presented through forms that revolve around heroes: sagas, ballads [and] westerns" (Donaldson, 1993, p. 646).

Similar to classic horror, "the Western has often been described as a conservative film genre, one that stresses extreme versions of masculinity and individualism and [served as] one of the inspirations for the Reagan White House" (McGee, 2007, p. xiv). Andrew Lincoln, the actor who portrays Rick Grimes in *The Walking Dead*, has likened the series to a modern western, due to Frank Darabont, who developed the series and served as showrunner for its first season (2010), drawing influence from western cinematography and iconography for its visual style (Jeffrey, 2010). Darabont himself realized early in the development of the series "that the story of a small group of survivors navigating a dangerous, zombie-filled America was more like a Western than he [initially] guessed" (Marshall, 2010, para. 5). This connection is not unprecedented, as film scholars have identified a number of similarities between western and zombie fiction, in particular their shared colonial influence. Colonialism refers to the exertion of authority over a territory with the intent to modernize it while exploiting its resources and peoples. American colonialism specifically refers to the taming of the western frontier and subjugation of Native American communities. Western fiction "has its roots firmly in a context of colonialism" (Hassler-Forest, 2011, p. 342), with Native Americans serving antagonistic roles and largely portrayed as dangerous, uncivilized savages. Zombies serve a similar function in horror narratives, with Gerry Canavan (2010) describing them as "completely realized colonial objects [that cannot] be recognized, accommodated, or negotiated with; once identified, they must immediately be killed" (p. 437). Consequently, many zombie texts besides *The Walking Dead* have drawn influence from "the western and its threatening world of savage colonial subjects" (Hassler-Forest, 2011, p. 342).

Another particular threat that plagues Rick and Shane, both of whom are coded in *The Walking Dead* as modern-day cowboys, is that of feminization. The cowboy is a classic hero of western lore, associated with the wildness of the West and "rugged, outdoors masculinity"

(Christensen & Ferree, 2008, p. 291). The pair's masculine identities are established early in the

series pilot, "Days Gone Bye" (Darabont, 2010). After the pilot's cold open, which portrays a

flashforward set during the outbreak, the second scene jumps back several weeks prior to the

apocalypse, with Rick and Shane on patrol and discussing their relationships. As they eat lunch

in their patrol cruiser, Rick asks his friend "What's the difference between men and women?"

Shane responds:

> SHANE
> Never met a woman who knew how to turn off a light. Born
> thinking the switch only goes one way: on. Come home, house all
> lit up, and my job, you see, apparently because my chromosomes
> happen to be different is that I gotta walk through that house and
> turn off every single light this chick left on … Then this same
> chick, mind ya, she'll bitch about, uh, global warming. This is
> where Reverend Shane wants to quote from the Guy Gospel and
> say, "Uh, darlin', maybe if you and every other pair of boobs on
> this planet could just figure out that the light switch, see, goes both
> ways, maybe we wouldn't have so much global warming?"
>
> RICK
> You say that?
>
> SHANE
> The polite version. Still, that earns me this look of loathing you
> would not believe, and that's when the *Exorcist* voice pops out:
> "You sound just like my damn father! Always yellin' about the
> power bill and tellin' me to turn off the damn lights!"
>
> RICK
> What do you say to that?
>
> SHANE
> I know what I want to say. What I want to say, "Bitch, you mean to
> tell me you've been hearing this your entire life and you are still
> too damn stupid to learn how to turn off a switch?"

Shane objectifies his unnamed girlfriend, referring to her personally as "bitch" and women in

general as "pair[s] of boobs." He also belittles women's intelligence, another common trait of

macho masculinity:

The word "macho" … refers to a social constructed "gender ideological" notion of what

it means to be "manly" that is carried out to the point of exaggeration. Central to the ideal

are the traits of masculinity, virility, and physicality as well as a strong contempt for

affects that are believed to be inferior, feminine traits … the hyper masculine male

eschews and even ridicules "soft-hearted" emotions, celebrates and views as inevitable

male physical aggression, [and] blocks attempts … to appeal to emotions by belittling

sexual relations or women in general (Scharrer, 2001, p. 616 – 617).

Rick laughs at Shane's story, thus conveying his own endorsement towards his partner's

particularly misogynistic brand of humor. The conversation then turns to Rick's marital

difficulties with Lori, prompting Shane to tease:

SHANE
Do you express your thoughts? You share your feelings and that
kind of stuff?

RICK
The thing is, lately whenever I try, everything I say makes her
impatient, like she didn't want to hear it after all. It's like she's
pissed at me all the time, and I don't know why … Last thing she
said 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. Difference between men and women? I
would never say something that cruel to her.

True to his macho character, Shane questions Rick's masculinity, as traditional gender

roles dictate that men do not outwardly express emotion (Monaghan & Robertson, 2012). While

Rick does not share all of Shane's macho tendencies, he similarly associates Lori, and therefore

greater femininity, with hysterical, irrational emotionality. This scene, the second of the entire

series, thus sets the expectation of gendered representation in *The Walking Dead*, which

Katherine Sugg (2015) describes as a "regressive conception of gender: [women express]

nurturing and protective nature while [men are] shown to be level-headed, quick-acting, and

good at perceiving and planning for dangers" (p. 795). Men who possess the former and lack the

latter are derided among conservatives as contributing to the "wussfication of America"

(Abrams, 2017), with the supposed weakening of the country directly influenced by the

perceived feminization of American men during the new millennium. In contrast, the cowboys of

The Walking Dead represent a restoration of what many conservatives view as "proper"

masculinity, particularly its hegemonic position over other identities and emphasis on warrior

mentality. However, the toxicity of such macho traits and their effects on the male psyche are

well documented. As stated by Roger Horrocks (1994):

> Patriarchal masculinity cripples men. Manhood as we know it in our society requires such
>
> a self-destructive identity, a deeply masochistic self-denial, a shrinkage of the self, a
>
> turning away from whole areas of life […] This is the cryptic message of masculinity:
>
> don't accept who you are. Conceal your weakness, your tears, your fear of death, [and]
>
> your love for others (p. 25).

Ultimately, it is this message *The Walking Dead* conveys to male viewers, a message that has

gained new resonance within the context of Donald Trump's presidency.

"Natural" Gender Roles and Responsibilities

When Rick reunites with his family in the third episode of the series, "Tell It to the

Frogs" (Darabont, Eglee, LoGiudice & Horder-Payton, 2010), he tours the survivors' camp and

sees that responsibilities have been divided based entirely on sex. Shane and the other men in the

camp exclusively carry firearms[19], which they use to hunt for food and defend the camp. In

contrast, Lori and the women are wholly denied access to firearms, instead relegated to fulfilling

traditional domestic responsibilities, such as preparing food and washing clothes (Bianchi,

---

[19] Access to firearms is one of the most prominent Republican values, and the party has
historically resisted any major attempt to reform gun control. Trump himself is an outspoken
supporter of the National Rifle Association (NRA), a lobbying organization for gun rights. *The
Walking Dead*, with its heavy emphasis on and fetishization of gun culture, portrays an idealized
alternate macho-world that Trump, the NRA, and the far right might aspire to.

Milkie, Robinson & Sayer, 2000). Although "the zombie narrative in particular makes possible alternative visions of femininity, opening up spaces for the female viewer that do not rely significantly on gender stereotypes" (Patterson, 2008, p. 111), *The Walking Dead* neglects to portray any alternatives:

> Gender stereotypes are pervasive, well documented, and highly resistant to change. Gender stereotypes both describe stereotypic beliefs about the attributes of women and men, and prescribe how men and women out to be. Men are stereotyped with agentic characteristics such as confidence, assertiveness, independence, rationality, and decisiveness, whereas women are stereotyped with communal characteristics such as concern for others, sensitivity, warmth, helpfulness, and nurturance (Northouse, 2013, p. 358).

In the earliest seasons of the series, only one woman attempts to defy such regressive gender ideology: Andrea, a former civil rights attorney. Andrea rebukes the community's adopted patriarchal hierarchy and attempts to assert her own agency. To this end, Andrea begins training herself in weaponry. In American culture, "guns [are] inseparable from masculinity [and] entrenched with one another" (Tolley-Stokes, 2004, p. 363 – 464). In popular television especially, guns are often "read as a form of cliché for the male penis" (Faucette, 2014, p. 76), signifying not only authority but also "masculinity and male potency" (McGillis, 2009, p. 76). Because firearms proficiency and usage are traditionally viewed as masculine characteristics, Andrea's display of them marks her as a gender deviant:

> Gender deviance is linked to violations of heteronormativity (presumptions about gender performance, gender identity, and heterosexuality). This means a wide range of performances … can embody "doing gender deviance" (Dirks & Worthen, 2015, p. 281).

Through her masculine performativity, Andrea diverts from traditional expectations of femininity, although *The Walking Dead* portrays her as largely incompetent in the use of firearms. In the episode "Chupacabra" (Johnson & Ferland, 2011), another member of the group, Daryl Dixon, is returning to the farm from an expedition in the forest. Andrea mistakes Daryl for a zombie due to his lethargic movements and shoots him with a sniper rifle, grazing his head. The entire group criticizes Andrea for her actions, especially as Rick had banned the use of firearms after realizing zombies are attracted to sound. Ultimately, Daryl is only saved by Andrea's poor skill with the weapon. Charing Ball, writing for *Madame Noire* (2013), was highly critical of *The Walking Dead*'s treatment of Andrea, especially as she was the single woman to display any agency of her own:

> Like an infant child learning to walk, Andrea bumbled her way through her
> independence, making plenty of poor (and sometimes irrational) decisions … Despite
> being strong, resilient and insightful, we are told that Andrea is just not smart enough to
> make it with her own … Despite her noble efforts of try to claim some independence for
> herself, Andrea just wasn't smart enough to hack it out in the real world all alone (para.
> 7).

Andrea's repeated efforts throughout the season to be viewed as an equal to the men draws ire from Lori, who accepts her subordinate standing in the group's gender hierarchy. In the season two episode "18 Miles Out" (Gimple, Mazzara & Dickerson, 2012), Lori suggests that Andrea help the group by continuing to cook and clean with the rest of the women, much to Andrea's anger:

<div align="center">LORI</div>

The men … don't need your help.

<div align="center">ANDREA</div>

I'm sorry. What would you have me do?

<div align="center">LORI</div>

Oh, there's plenty of work to go around.

<div align="center">ANDREA</div>

Are you serious? Everything falls apart, you're in my face over
skipping laundry?

<div align="center">LORI</div>

Puts a burden on the rest of us … You sit up on that RV, working
on your tan with a shotgun in your lap.

<div align="center">ANDREA</div>

No, I am on watch against walkers. That is what matters, not fresh
mint leaves in the lemonade.

<div align="center">LORI</div>

And we are providing stability. We are trying to create a life worth
living.

Megan Kearns (2012), writing for feminist review site *Bitch Flicks*, characterized Lori as

"the worst perpetrator of gender stereotypes [in the series]" (para. 29), and described the scene as

"anti-feminist" (para. 30). Lesley Goldberg (2012), writing for *The Hollywood Reporter*,

similarly criticized "Andrea and Lori's showdown over Lori's 1950s housewife mentality [as]

insane" (para. 12). Goldberg's analogy is apt, as "the wife of the 1950s saw herself – and was

encouraged to do so by the media and the pressure of society – as supermother, pure and simple"

(Ogden, 1986, p. 174).

As Trump campaigned on an implicit promise to restore patriarchal masculinity, he was

by extension also campaigning on a promise to restore such bygone delineations of gender. In

light of his misogynistic rhetoric during the election, *The Hollywood Reporter* published a

previously unreleased 1994 transcript from an episode of ABC's *Primetime Live* news program,

in which Trump was interviewed by journalist Nancy Collins. Trump related his reluctance at

allowing his then-wife Ivana to manage casinos for the Trump Organization, opining that

"putting your wife to work is a very dangerous thing — the single biggest reason my marriage

stopped being good […] Ivana had a great softness that disappeared. She became an executive,

not a wife" (Collins, 2016, para. 53 – 54). As observed by writer Emily Crockett (2016), Trump

sees "an irreconcilable difference between being an 'executive' and being a 'wife'" (para. 11).

This is further evidenced through Trump's statement during the *Primetime Live* interview that

"when I come home at night and dinner's not ready I go through the roof" (Collins, 2016, para.

54). During the 2016 presidential election more than 20 years later, Trump's current wife

Melania[20] largely eschewed the public eye, with spokespersons for the Trumps emphasizing

Melania's domestic abilities and her focus on raising their son Barron (Dawsey, Heil & Jordan,

2018). Simultaneously, "Trump and his vice-presidential nominee, Mike Pence, routinely

declared on the campaign trail that 'broad shouldered' leadership was the only way to keep

Americans safe from danger" (Dolan, 2018, p. 38).

From the 1990s to present day, Trump's attitudes and understanding of gender is clear

from his rhetoric: women should be exclusively relegated to domestic duties, while men

exclusively can be entrusted with assertiveness, leadership, and safety. Despite the obvious

sexism of such thinking, many of Trump's male supporters view such predetermined gender

roles as the natural order, interrupted and poisoned by modern feminism. Regressive gender roles

such as these have been normalized in part by popular television texts (Bacue & Signorielli,

1999). As evidenced by the think pieces written by Ball, Goldberg and Kearns, the first two

seasons of *The Walking Dead*, despite their popular success, continuue to reinforce the gender

stereotypes that would later characterize Trump's rhetoric towards women. Seemingly in

response to such vocal criticism, *The Walking Dead*'s third season (2012 – 2013) takes a step

forward in the series' treatment of women. The season three premiere, "Seed" (Mazzara &

Dickerson, 2012), establishes that Rick has since trained all the women in the use of firearms, as

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[20] Melania is Trump's third wife, who he married in 2005. Ivana was married to Trump from
1977 to 1992. She notably accused Trump of marital rape, although she later softened this claim
(Graves & Morris, 2017).

evidenced when he mentions to group member Carol Peletier that "you've become a pretty good

shot." Carol and her peers' newfound capability demonstrated in an early set piece, where the

group settles in an abandoned prison complex[21] and clears it of zombies. However, Gencarella

criticizes *The Walking Dead* for allowing women "only narrow, traditionally fascist avenues for

[character] growth," with women in the series delegated to being either "uncritical nurses to the

soldier males or [soldiers] just like the males … All other versions of femininity eventually

prove weak or monstrous" (Collins, 2016, para. 14). Additionally, the women remain

perpetually subordinate to Rick, thus maintaining both his and greater masculine hegemony.

Masculine Leadership and the Dominance of Women

Rick's style of leadership is popularly referred to within *The Walking Dead*'s fandom as

the "Ricktatorship" (Gould & Meslow, 2013). The term was inspired by a line by Rick in the

second two finale, "Beside the Dying Fire" (Kirkman, Mazzara & Dickerson, 2012). After

narrowly escaping from a large herd of zombies, Rick snaps at the group, whom he perceives as

ungrateful and argues would be helpless without his leadership:

RICK
Maybe you people are better off without me. Go ahead. I say
there's a place for us, but maybe, maybe it's just another pipe
dream. Maybe I'm fooling myself again. Why don't you go out
and find out yourself? Send me a postcard! Go on, there's the door.
You can do better? Let's see how far you get. No takers? Fine. But
get one thing straight. You're staying? This isn't a democracy
anymore.

Kirkman and Glen Mazzara, who served as showrunner for the second and third seasons,

explained that Rick's monologue at the conclusion of "Beside the Dying Fire" is meant to

---

[21] There are stark racial disparities in the American prison system, with African Americans
experiencing "substantially higher [incarceration] than whites relative to their respective shares
of the population" (Tonry, 1995, p. 52), especially following Reagan's presidency. This serves to
other prison communities based not only on societal deviance but also race. However, the prison
in *The Walking Dead* is safe for white settlers due to the more exaggerated otherness of the
zombie herds outside its wall.

represent "true horror" (Goldberg, 2012, para. 21), with Rick transitioning into a darker character, and that season three (2012 – 2013) would explore whether the surviving members of the group were "sticking by him through loyalty or through fear" (para. 22). However, *The Walking Dead* never commits to this narrative thread. Despite cultural critic Charing Ball (2013) observing that Rick is often "domineering and verbally abusive" (para. 9), it is overwhelmingly clear that the group follows Rick out of patriarchal loyalty.

The Ricktatorship is a model of alpha male masculinity, an extreme form of hegemonic masculinity characterized by assertive, forceful behavior (Beadling, 2016). Alpha male masculinity often demonstrates toxic traits such as misogyny, intimidation, and domination (Kupers, 2005). Rick frequently indulges in aggressive, violent behavior to ensure the group's survival in the apocalypse, due to the continuous physical danger posed by the zombies and rival factions. Because popular models of hegemonic masculinity are often built on a fundamental foundation of violent display (Maruska, 2012), the Ricktatorship is exalted within a sector of *The Walking Dead*'s fandom as representing idealized masculinity, similar to how Walter White's "Heisenberg" persona was embraced by fans of *Breaking Bad*. Alpha male masculinity "exists in relation to its opposite, the beta male, a figure that emerged in the wake of the second-wave feminist movement and that represents a kinder, gentler version of masculinity" (Albrecht, 2016, p. 34). The new man influenced by contemporary feminism represents "the modern image of manhood [and] specifically values talk, maturity, intellect, respect for women and self-control as signs of the progress of 'civilized man'" (Christensen & Ferree, 2008, p. 291). It is precisely this model of masculinity that Trumpism rejects, viewing the "new man" as a weak and metaphorically castrated by feminism (Abrams, 2017). In contrast, Trump's supporters view him as "the answer to feminism. He's the fearless man. He's the strong man. He's the man who laughs in the face of the social-justice warrior and demonstrates the appeal of pure, unadulterated

aggression and virility" (French, 2016, p. 19). Trump's aggression and virility are demonstrated

through his machismo rhetoric and behavior, "from boasting about the size of his penis on

national television to releasing records of his high testosterone levels, [which] struck a chord

with some male voters" (DiMuccio & Knowles, 2018, para. 1). To these voters, Trump is the

undeniable alpha male of American politics, evident through his "ultra-self-assertion," "violent

gestures," and "compliant women" (Connolly, 2017, p. 28) – not unlike the Ricktatorship. In *The

Walking Dead*, Rick's alpha masculinity is similarly portrayed through his forcing into

submission of various women.

Even when Rick ostensibly renounces leadership in season four (2013 – 2014), he

remains the community's ultimate authority. The prison has evolved into a thriving community

consisting of survivors and refugees from across the state. While Rick focuses on raising Carl

and his newborn daughter Judith, the prison is managed by a council comprising three man and

two women, including Carol. Pre-apocalypse, Carol was a simple housewife, physically and

emotionally abused by her husband Ed. Although Ed is killed in the same zombie attack that

takes the life of Andrea's sister Amy, Carol retains her meek personality throughout the first and

second seasons. Carol is thus arguably the character most benefited by the modified creative

direction of season three, having shed her timid personality and become an active, contributing

member of the group and a skilled combatant. Carol even takes it upon herself to make difficult

decisions that she believes will ultimately benefit the group. When the prison is struck by a

deadly strain of flu, Carol kills two other survivors and burns their bodies in an attempt to

contain the disease. In the episode "Indifference" (Negrete & Brock, 2013), Rick and Carol

scavenge for supplies at a distant town, where they come to blows over Carol's actions. Carol

admits her culpability to Rick, who decides to abandon her in the town:

                                              RICK
                When the others find out, they won't want you there. And if
                everybody dies of this thing and it's just the two of us, with Judith
                and Carl – with my children? I won't have you there.

                                              CAROL
                Rick, it's me. No one else has to know. I thought you were done
                making decisions for everyone.

                                              RICK
                I'm making this decision for me.

                                              CAROL
                I could have pretended that everything was gonna be fine. But I
                didn't. I did something. I stepped up. I had to do something.

                                              RICK
                No, you didn't.

Rick views Carol's actions as motivated by rash emotionality. Notably, women face more

impediments in leadership than men (Eagly & Kark, 2010; Febbraro & Gill, 2010; Flanagan &

O'Leary, 2002; Klenke, 1996; Northouse, 2013; Reid & Zalk, 2002), due to such traits being

stereotypically associated with femininity (Carranza & Prentice, 2002) Popular culture is

particularly responsible for propagating such beliefs, as "sex-role behavior is portrayed in highly

stereotypic fashion in virtually every aspect of television programming" (Freuh & McGee, 1980,

p. 180). For example, "males tend to be represented as smarter, more rational, more powerful

[and] more stable" than women (p. 180). Such gender stereotypes function as prominent barriers

that impede the respect granted to women leaders:

> [These] stereotypes are based on the assumption that women lack the attributes, abilities,
>
> skills, and motivation required for leadership roles. Behaviors such as emotionality,
>
> dependency, and sensitivity associated with the female gender stereotype are perceived as
>
> incompatible with requirements for leadership (Klenke, 1996, p. 156).

Because Trump and his supporters "regularly drew attention to Clinton's gender in criticizing

her, [this] brought gender to the forefront of the 2016 election" (p. 450). Specifically, Trump

criticized Clinton for a perceived lack of physical strength and stamina, being physically

unattractive, and characterized her as indecisive and cowardly (Abdullah & Darweesh, 2016).

Ultimately, "the sexist aspects that are encoded within the language of Trump mainly resulted

from the encoding of reality from a masculine point of view. Trump's evaluation of women

reflects his ideology about the superiority of males on females and how such ideological beliefs

are ingrained in language and are difficult to be changed" (p. 94 – 95). *The Walking Dead*

reflects similar ideology when contrasting female leaders with male ones, specifically Rick.

Despite Carol stepping into a leadership role that he himself vacated, Rick does not view her as

rational, let alone as an equal. Rick the cowboy remains the superior authority between the two

of them simply because he is a man – and as affirmed by Trump's rhetoric, men are inherently

more qualified leaders. Carol eventually rejoins the group in season five (2014 – 2015), albeit as

Rick's lieutenant, thus preserving traditional gender hierarchy and masculine hegemony within

their community.

After a violent battle with a rival faction led by a murderous individual known as the

"Governor" takes Hershel's life and forces Rick's group to abandon the prison, they become

nomads. Under Rick's renewed leadership, the group migrates to Virginia. In the season five

episode "Remember" (Powell & Nicotero, 2015), they reach Alexandria, a walled community

led by a woman named Deanna Monroe, a former legislator. It is worth noting that in Kirkman's

original comics, Deanna's counterpart is a man named Douglas Monroe. Because "women are

significantly underrepresented in major leadership positions" (Northouse, 2013, p. 374), the

character's gender swap is particularly notable. However, Deanna's character arc unfortunately

portrays another scenario in *The Walking Dead* where a man subjugates a woman.

Despite evidence "that male and female leaders are similar in many personality traits and

job-related behaviors" (Klenke, 1996, p. 162), the popular "image of authority remains a father-

like figure (i.e., nonfemale)" (Reid & Zalk, 2002, p. 36). This stems "from the incongruity between the female gender role and the leadership role" (Northouse, 2013, p. 362), as traditional gender roles "stipulate that women should be especially communal, and the prescriptions for most leadership roles stipulate that leaders should be especially agentic" (Eagly & Kark, 2010, p. 450). Agentic leaders are "competitive and autonomous, and [can] use confrontation when necessary," all of which are popularly coded as masculine traits (Goby & Nickerson, 2017, p. 232). If female leaders display such traits, they can be stigmatized for violating gender expectations (Febbraro & Gill, 2010; Flanagan & O'Leary, 2002), as "female aggression … is considered unacceptable and deviant behavior for women" (Klenke, 1996, p. 144). The result of this dilemma is that if a woman's "behavior confirms the gender stereotypes, they are not thought to be acting as a proper leader, but if their behavior is consistent with the leader stereotype, they are not thought to be acting as a proper woman" (Eagly & Kark, 2010, p. 450).

Rick views Deanna as a poor leader because she conforms to gender stereotypes. Deanna is kind, approachable, and idealistic, favoring diplomacy over violence. Deanna believes that Alexandria represents the rebirth of civilization post-apocalypse. To this end, she dispatches recruiters to locate survivors and invite them to Alexandria. Frequently, "highly communal female leaders [are] criticized for not being agentic enough and not properly taking charge" (Eagly & Kark, 2010, p. 450), and it is this criticism Rick directs towards Deanna. Rick views Alexandria's populace, being unfamiliar with weapons and accustomed to comfort, as weak and feminine, and Deanna's leadership as incompatible with the violent reality of the apocalypse, where extreme, violent versions of masculinity are the only legitimate leadership models. Although Deanna and Rick clash over how best to lead Alexandria, Rick is soon validated through Deanna's own endorsement.

In episode "Try" (Kang & Satrazemis, 2015), Rick brutalizes Alexandria's surgeon, Pete Anderson. Despite the revelation that Pete was abusing his wife, Deanna tolerated his behavior because she considered his medical skills invaluable. Rick beats Pete in front of a crowd and openly criticizes their complacency and fear of conflict, insisting that "if you don't fight, you die." In the subsequent episode and season five finale, "Conquer" (Gimple, Hoffman & Nicotero, 2015), Deanna hosts a public forum to determine if Rick should be banished for the perceived extremity of his behavior. Ironically, Rick is validated when a group of zombies penetrates Alexandria's walls. Rick kills the zombies and delivers their corpses to the forum, stating "I'm not sorry for what I said last night. I'm sorry for not saying it sooner. You're not ready, but you have to be." From this episode onwards, Deanna endorses Rick's use of violence and promotes him to co-leader of Alexandria, although this collaboration does not last long. In the season six episode "Now" (Reed & Youabian, 2015), Deanna's own son Spencer criticizes her as naïve and argues that her misplaced idealism made Alexandria susceptible to attack, a charge that leaves her speechless and unconfident. After Rick personally saves Deanna from a zombie during the climax of the episode, Deanna admits that Rick is the superior leader and wholly concedes her position to him, retiring from Alexandria's leadership. Deanna noticeably highlights Rick's experience with aggressive confrontation, experience she lacks entirely, as the deciding factor in her decision.

This particular plotline is eerily prescient in that it predicted the triumph of macho-populism over more qualified feminine leadership in a political arena, realized by Trump's victory over Clinton during the last election. Interestingly, Tovah Feldshuh, the actress who portrays Deanna in *The Walking Dead*, modeled her performance on Clinton, explaining that "she's somebody I've admired and [is] incredibly qualified to lead the nation. She's been in service to the United States for a good deal of her life. I studied her as my immediate prototype"

(Berkshire, 2015, para. 7). However, this only further highlights *The Walking Dead*'s regressive

gender politics. Clinton (2017) affirms that misogyny played a role in her defeat. Although

Robin Lakoff (2017) states that the notion is "seldom encountered in post-election analyses, and

when uttered, usually dismissively" (p. 596), she asserts that many Trump supporters indeed

"derided and savaged [Clinton], because as a woman, she had no right to speak publicly; no right

to seek the position she was seeking; no right, most deeply, to ask for something, especially

power, for herself" (p. 597). In her public appearances or debates with Trump, Clinton was

neither "flirtatious or deferential. This [made] her scary to the insecure, male and female both"

(Lakoff, 2017, p. 598). Similar to Deanna,[22] Clinton violated popular expectations of femininity

by pursuing a position in leadership. Ultimately, both *The Walking Dead* and the last presidential

election indicate a strong interest amongst a faction of the American populace in the preservation

of traditional gender and power dynamics, evidenced through both Rick's ascendancy over

Deanna and Trump's defeat of Clinton.

The Policing of Women's Bodies

Besides the obvious conflict against zombies, another, less explicit struggle throughout

The Walking Dead is the discord over women's autonomy. In "TS-19" (Darabont, Fierro &

Ferland, 2010), the first season finale, the group seeks shelter at the Centers for Disease Control

and Prevention (CDC) headquarters in Atlanta. However, the group is forced to flee the CDC

after the complex runs out of fuel, activating a self-destruct sequence in order to prevent any

diseases from being released. Andrea, despondent after watching her younger sister Amy die

---

[22] Another female community leader introduced after Deanna is Jadis, who debuts in the season seven episode "New Best Friends" (Powell & January, 2017). Jadis is a gender-fluid woman who leads the Scavengers, a group of survivors living in a junkyard. She speaks in broken English and has a masculine haircut, thus coding her as Other, possibly even lesbian due to her hair style and mannerisms (Bimbi, Golub, Walker & Parsons, 2012). While Jadis is an effective leader, being both cunning and unafraid of confrontation, she is still portrayed as a gender deviant whose leadership cannot be reconciled with normalized femininity (Eagly & Kark, 2010; Febbraro & Gill, 2010; Klenke, 1996; Northouse, 2013).

during a zombie attack in the previous episode "Vatos" (Kirkman & Renck, 2010), elects to

remain at the CDC and die in the blast. Her friend Dale Hovarth begs her to reconsider, stating

that "this isn't what Amy would want for you. She's dead, and you need to leave." When this

appeal fails, Dale simply sits beside a nonplussed Andrea:

<div align="center">DALE</div>

Okay. You win.

<div align="center">ANDREA</div>

What are you doing?

<div align="center">DALE</div>

I said okay.

<div align="center">ANDREA</div>

Don't pull this, Dale.

<div align="center">DALE</div>

I'm not pulling anything. If you're staying I stay too … We know
what's waiting for us out there. I don't want to face it alone.

<div align="center">ANDREA</div>

Dale, get the Hell out. I don't want you here.

<div align="center">DALE</div>

Too bad. See, you don't get to do that, to come into somebody's
life, make them care and then just check out. I'm staying. The
matter is settled.

Andrea decides to leave the CDC with Dale, and together they escape the complex before it

explodes. In the subsequent episode and season two premiere, "What Lies Ahead" (Bey,

Kirkman & Horder-Payton, 2011), Dale, concerned that Andrea is still suicidal, hides her gun.

After Andrea learns this she becomes irate, as the gun was a present from her deceased father.

The two descend into argument, with Dale defending both his confiscation of the gun and his

actions at the CDC:

<div align="center">DALE</div>

I saved your life.

ANDREA

No, Dale. I saved yours. You forced that on me. I didn't want your
blood on my hands and that is the only reason I left that building.
What did you expect? What, I'd have some kind of epiphany?
Some life-affirming catharsis?

DALE

Maybe just a little gratitude.

ANDREA

Gratitude? I wanted to die my way, not torn apart by drooling
freaks. That was my choice. You took that away from me, Dale.
But you know better? All I wanted after my sister died was to get
out of this endless horrific nightmare we live every day. I wasn't
hurting anyone else. You took my choice away, Dale.

In response, Dale insists that Andrea wasn't thinking clearly due to Amy's recent death. By

questioning her perception of events and offering an alternative narrative, Dale is effectively

gaslighting Andrea. Lorraine Berry, writing for *Salon* (2012), was highly critical of this scene,

stating:

> [Dale] resorts to *mansplaining* to Andrea that he's convinced that he's done the right
>
> thing for her, that he expects gratitude from her for forcing her hand in making her
>
> choose to live in order to save him. Men overrule women whenever they make choices …
>
> Andrea's insistence on "choice" over whether to live or die echoes the current argument
>
> over choice over women's reproductive systems— even using some of the same language
>
> — and Dale is turned into the voice of the man who can only think that all life is sacred
>
> (para. 10).

Berry's observation towards Andrea and Dale's rhetoric of choice is interesting. In

patriarchal societies such as the United States, "religious values and social norms [are] designed

to limit the right to use any or all methods of fertility regulation such as artificial contraception

or abortion" (Dixon-Mueller, 1993, p. 14). Patriarchal attempts to minimize women's

reproductive autonomy derives from the womb being described in Abrahamic scriptures "as

merely the property of the male God, who appropriates the woman's role in childbirth" (Ende, Farrell, Pojas & Semmelhack, 2011, p. 170). While this debate is merely subtext in Dale and Andrea's relationship, it is explicitly conveyed through Rick and Lori's conflict over their unborn child in season two, and Rick's resulting attempts to exercise influence over his wife's very body.

During the second season of the series (2011 – 2012), the group flees Atlanta to the countryside and settles at an isolated farm owned by Hershel Greene. During their tenure at the farm, Lori discovers she is pregnant with Judith. In the episode "Secrets" (Kang & Boyd), Lori, reluctant to bring a child into the ruined, dangerous world of the zombie apocalypse, asks fellow group member Glenn Rhee to acquire morning-after pills at an abandoned pharmacy nearby so that she may terminate the pregnancy. Unfortunately, *The Walking Dead* does not divert from the historical treatment of abortion in popular television, which largely stigmatizes the procedure as shameful and disreputable (Kimport & Sisso, 2014). With the help of Maggie, Hershel's daughter, Glenn succeeds in acquiring the pills for Lori, but Maggie is disgusted by Lori's intent. When she and Glenn return to the farm from the pharmacy, Maggie throws the pills at Lori, declaring "Here's your abortion pills!" Kearns (2012) was disturbed by Maggie's reaction, and criticized how *The Walking Dead*'s ensemble was composed of "conservative characters [that] continually depict retro gender norms" (para, 3). Katherine Don (2011), writing for fellow feminist review site *Bitch Media*, was similarly disappointed in the episode, stating that:

> When reproductive choices are … manhandled by scriptwriters who don't recognize a
> woman's ability to weigh options and make decisions, the woman is robbed of her
> individuality, humanity and dignity (para. 15).

Don's statement holds merit. After Rick discovers the pills, he confronts Lori, who finally reveals her pregnancy to him, resulting in a heated conversation:

<div align="center">

RICK
Instead of going to me, you sent [Glenn] to get pills?

LORI
I panicked. You tell me we have no roof and no walls –

RICK
Do not put this on me! You tear into me for keeping secrets when
you're holding onto this?

LORI
You want me to bring a baby into this? To live a short, cruel life?

RICK
How can you think like that!?

</div>

Rick and Lori's argument regarding their unborn child marks the climax of "Secrets."

This plotline is not unique to *The Walking Dead*, as anxiety and debates regarding childbirth are

a reoccurring trope in zombie fiction, due to the heightened dangers and lack of resources in the

post-apocalyptic world:

> Whatever else might be said about *The Walking Dead*, or about zombie narrative in
>
> general, its uncritical relationship to a particular pre-feminist narrative about the need to
>
> "protect" women and children cannot be glossed over. "Proper" control over wombs, and
>
> anxiety that they will somehow be captured, polluted, or compromised, is … so common
>
> in the zombie subgenre as to constitute one of its most ubiquitous and most central ethical
>
> clichés: the question of whether or not one should decide to "bring a child into" a
>
> zombie-ridden world at all (Canavan, 2010, p. 444).

Despite the ubiquity of this particular conflict in zombie narratives, its treatment in *The Walking*

Dead attracted a noticeable amount of criticism. One of Don's specific critiques of the episode,

shared by a number of television critics and commentators, was Lori's portrayal "as a sniveling,

downtrodden person whose perfectly reasonable protests are framed as nagging whines" (para.

14). In "Secrets," Rick ignores his wife's concerns and gaslights Lori, insisting that "You want this baby. I know you do."

Debates over abortion are a reoccurring trope in greater zombie fiction, with "the moment the circuit of reproductive futurity is cut [being] the moment that basically all hope is lost" (Canavan, 2010, p. 444). *The Walking Dead* follows this trope, with Rick's own desires and feelings regarding the pregnancy far overshadowing those of Lori's, thus demonstrating *The Walking Dead*'s "gendered division of narrative grammar" (Sugg, 2015, p. 803). Ultimately, *The Walking Dead* implies that women cannot be trusted to make rational decisions, even regarding their own lives or bodies, due to the inherent irrationality and fragility of their femininity. This is similarly represented in modern American politics. Although "opposition to abortion rights is one of the unifying views of the Republican party" (Greer, McKee, Stuckler, 2017, p. 6), Trump's administration especially has made concentrated steps to restrict women's reproductive rights and abortion-choice access. In contrast to Clinton, who "voiced unconditional support for abortion rights" throughout the election, Trump managed to secure "an outright majority of evangelical voters [by maintaining] a strongly pro-life stance during the primaries" (Gorski, 2017, p. 339). During his presidential campaign, Trump stated that there should be "some form of punishment" for women who have abortions and promised to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, the Supreme Court ruling that deemed access to abortion to be a fundamental right (Flegenheimer & Haberman, 2016). Both in *The Walking Dead* and in Trump's America, aggressive opposition to abortion is a microcosm of greater patriarchal ideology regarding authority and control over women's bodies.

Women's Bodies as Trophies of Masculine Validation

Because "white heterosexual middle- and upper-class men who occupy order-giving positions … produce a hegemonic masculinity that is glorified throughout [American] culture"

(Cooper, 2012, p. 104), law enforcement officials are recognized as particular masculine archetypes. A classic example of this archetype is the small-town sheriff from American frontier history, which westerns have embedded into the country's cultural consciousness. The popular representation of this archetype is a man defined by his working-class roots and laconic demeanor, both traits that Rick and Shane exhibit. The cowboy and other alpha male archetypes in popular texts are also frequently characterized as "dominant, aggressive, controlling, powerful, passionate seducer[s] whose very masculinity [attracts sexual partners]" (Schell, 2007, p. 118). A central component of hegemonic masculinity is that "women provide heterosexual men with sexual validation, and men compete with each other for this [validation]" (Donaldson, 1993, p. 651).

At the onset of the zombie outbreak, Shane attempts to retrieve Rick from the hospital where he is being treated but is forced to abandon his friend after the hospital is overrun by zombies. Shane rescues Lori and Carl and the trio travel to a safe zone in Atlanta. Upon discovering that Atlanta is similarly overrun and being bombed by the military, they establish a small community of survivors in a quarry just outside the city. Due to his previous experience as a law enforcement official, Shane is established as the head of the community. He also initiates a sexual relationship with Lori, as both believe Rick to be dead, and becomes a father figure to Carl. In addition to political and societal institutions, "socially legitimated hegemonic models of masculinity are also in play in families" (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 839). Within family groups, hegemonic masculinity is represented through "sustaining a sexual relationship, and being a father" (p. 840). By forming a makeshift family with Lori and Carl, Shane is able to validate his own masculinity. However, when Rick arrives at the quarry, Lori immediately ends her affair with Shane, leaving him devastated and emasculated. In "TS-19" (Darabont, Fierro & Ferland, 2010), at the CDC, a drunken Shane corners Lori and attempts to renew their

relationship, thus repairing his fragmented masculinity. After she refuses, Shane attempts to

force himself on her and only recedes when a frightened and resistant Lori scratches his face and

neck with her nails.

Shane's attempted rape of Lori is never mentioned in any subsequent episode. Joy

(2017), when critiquing "the lack of a serious engagement with domestic abuse and sexual

violence in *Breaking Bad*," observes that "similar depictions of abusive behavior in other popular

long-form U.S. dramas [include] the attempted rape of Lori (Sarah Wayne Callies) in *The*

Walking Dead" (p. 4). Joy argues that television series often depict sexual violence upon women

without exploring its effects on the victims' emotional or mental health, thus "deny[ing]

survivors of sexual assault and domestic violence their full complexity as human beings and their

experiences at the expense of an emphasis on male protagonists" (p. 4). Similar phenomena is

also present in contemporary political culture, as evidenced by the leaked *Hollywood Access* tape

in which Trump bragged to reporter Billy Bush about sexually assaulting women (Raeburn,

2016). Although Trump's comments were highly controversial, they were largely embraced on

far right radio and Internet shows. Various "macho" public figures, such as boxing star Floyd

Mayweather Jr., defended Trump's comments as simply reflecting how "a real man" talks

(Chavez, 2017), although such misogynistic thinking is indicative of toxic masculinity (Kupers,

2005).

While Lori never tells Rick of her encounter with Shane in the CDC, she eventually

confesses their earlier affair during the climax of "Secrets." Subsequently, Rick and Shane

transition from close friends to bitter rivals, with Shane unable to abandon his lust for Lori. In

the penultimate episode of season two, "Better Angels" (Mazzara, Reilly & Ferland, 2012),

Shane draws his gun on Rick and attacks his former friend's masculinity, arguing "I'm better for

Lori than you, man! I'm a better man than you, Rick, because I can fight for it." However, Rick

manages to stab Shane in the chest before Shane can fire a shot, foiling the assassination plot and killing Shane. Joanna Schroeder (2012) was critical of the episode, arguing that Lori was less of a fully realized, three-dimensional character than a plot device to spur conflict between Rick and Shane:

> At the center of the men's stories is the antiquated idea that there can only be one alpha male. Shane was the leader until Rick came back, then Shane handed over his woman to the pack leader. And Lori goes along with all of this as if she is some commodity to be traded, to be worn, like the king's crown. She is the Alpha Female simply because the Alpha Male has chosen her (para. 6 – 7).

Alpha males especially, by their very nature, cannot coexist in a shared community and must establish their ascendancy over their peers, often through their superior sexual success, a pattern that Trump follows. Melania is a Slovenian-American fashion model, while Ivana is a former Czech model. To Trump, association with "sexually pleasing" women such as models further validates his own masculinity in the political arena (Abdullah & Darweesh, 2016). When Trump considered running in the 2000 presidential election on the Reform Party ballot, he was quoted as saying "I think the only difference between me and the other candidates is that I'm more honest and my women are more beautiful" (p. 92). Trump demonstrated this same thinking during the last election, when he retweeted a meme disparaging the looks of Heidi Cruz, the wife of Texas senator Ted Cruz, Trump's chief opponent for the Republican presidential nomination (Blake, 2016). The fact that this meme, created by one of Trump's Twitter followers, directly compared Heidi with Melania in terms of sexual attractiveness, neatly encapsulates the misogynistic thinking that Trump has espoused and encouraged among his supporters: that women are markers of masculine success, living trophies in the form of dehumanized sexual objects. Unfortunately, when considering *The Walking Dead'*s popularity among conservative

audiences, its regressive portrayal of women and gender relations ostensibly validates Trump's

sexist rhetoric. Similarly, *The Walking Dead*'s portrayal of race also resonates with Trump's

prejudiced rhetoric towards African Americans.

<div align="center">**White Hegemony and Supremacy in *The Walking Dead***</div>

Horror texts such as *The Walking Dead* often elicit terror through "the presence of a

foreign or unfamiliar Other" (Bishop, 2010, p. 96). The Other is defined by its deviance

compared to dominant societal norms, and in American society, "the experiences and

communication patterns of whites are taken as the norm from which Others are marked" (Krizek

& Nakama, 1995, p. 293). Although Whiteness is the dominant cultural influence in the United

States, it is important to note that Whiteness and race "are guided not so much by any biological

foundation as by the social meanings that are ascribed to them" (Guess, 2006, p. 653). This

means that the actual definition of Whiteness is fluid, determined entirely by the contemporary

rhetoric of Whiteness (Krizek & Nakama, 1995), which often concerns "element[s] of race [and]

of Otherness" (Jackson, 1999, p. 43).

Race, both at a textual and subtextual level, is a frequently reoccurring element in zombie

fiction, with some scholars perceiving the genre "as a mode of analysis figuring alternative ways

of thinking about race relations" (Watts, 2017, p. 2). The zombie, being an archetypal example of

the Other, is often utilized within horror texts as an allegory for contemporary social concerns,

including racial fears. Many zombie texts produced after 9/11 were popularly interpreted as

analogies for terrorism (Bishop, 2010), specifically Muslim terrorism. Due to al-Qaeda's self-

proclaimed *jihadi* motivations, 9/11 provoked widespread Islamophobia across the country

(Ansari, Asadollahzadeh & Sharifi, 2016), due to the rampant misconception that al-Qaeda's

extremism was representative of Islam in its entirety (Salaita, 2006). Such commentary is not

obvious in *The Walking Dead*: a normalized Muslim character, a doctor named Siddiq, is

introduced in the season eight premiere "Mercy" (Gimple & Nicotero, 2017). So what does the

zombie represent in *The Walking Dead*? According to Romero himself, not much. Romero, who

prided himself on the social commentary he integrated into his films, criticized *The Walking*

Dead for its apparent lack of any greater theme, characterizing the series as "just a soap opera

with a zombie occasionally. I always used the zombie as a character for satire or a political

criticism and I find that missing in what's happening now" (MacKenzie, 2013, para. 2).[23]

Indeed, *The Walking Dead* has demonstrated considerable diversity throughout its run.

However, the value of these representations is subject to question – and therein lies the

problematic racial ideology of *The Walking Dead*. Despite the multiculturalism of *The Walking*

Dead, the series reinforces the ethos of White supremacy and hegemony, with the agency of its

minority characters entirely dependent on the whims of Rick Grimes. Unfortunately, this

parallels Trump's own fraught relations with minority communities in the United States, which

have been marked by accusations of bigotry and White supremacist leanings.

Asian Masculinity as Feminine and Inauthentic

The principal Asian character in *The Walking Dead* is the Korean American Glenn, a

former pizza delivery boy. Introduced in "Guts" (Darabont & MacLaren, 2010), the second

episode of the series, Glenn initially serves as the series' comic relief. He has an enthusiastic,

humorous personality, often deflecting feelings of fear or insecurity with jokes. He is

characterized by his emotional candor and vulnerability, traits largely absent from popular

portrayals of alpha male masculinity such as the cowboy (Christensen & Ferree, 2008). Glenn's

sense of humor especially endear him to Maggie, with whom he initiates a relationship. Glenn

thus portrays a more normalized model of Asian American identity when compared to dominant

depictions of the community in popular entertainment. Michael K. Park (2015) states that Asian

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[23] Romero passed away in 2017.

American men in particular "are conspicuously absent or typecast or relegated to stereotypical roles" (p. 371), the most eminent example being the "nerd," a book smart but clumsy and socially awkward individual (Zhang, 2010). While Glenn does not subscribe to the "nerd" stereotype, he does to others.

In American entertainment, Asian and Asian American men are popularly portrayed as weak and emasculated, bereft of hegemonic masculine norms (Lu & Wong, 2013). Park (2015) explains that "as an out-group stripped of hegemonic ideals of masculinity, Asian-American men have historically been viewed as effeminate, asexual, and passive. [They] are therefore branded with the inability to exude hegemonic masculinity" (p. 373). Trump himself has also mocked the Asian community as passive and meek, using "broken English and a bad accent to illustrate his past experience with Asian business partners," a parody that was criticized as being "fueled by xenophobic speech and thinking" (Wang, 2015, para. 2 – 5).

While Glenn's English in *The Walking Dead* is immaculate and unaccented, he does display other Asian American stereotypes described by Park, especially in early seasons of the series. After the zombie attack in "Vatos," Glenn is the only man shown crying. Compared to the alpha masculinity embodied by Rick and Shane, Glenn embodies a more feminine form of masculinity:

> The image of male versus female as a natural dualism allows differences among masculinities to be constructed as masculine–feminine; hegemonic masculinity, the version that is valued more highly than other kinds of masculinity, is constructed against these other subordinated masculinities, which by being "not masculine" are therefore framed as feminine (Christensen & Ferree, 2008, p. 289 – 290).

While Glenn gradually becomes more experienced in combat against zombies, Maggie admits to Lori in "18 Miles Out" that she suspects their relationship is affecting Glenn's

capability as a warrior by causing him to lose focus. In response, Lori orders Maggie to help

Glenn "man up." This exchange continues to reinforce hegemonic gender roles by portraying

women and emotions as inefficient, negatively impacting the ability of men to properly function

as hunter-gatherers. Kearns (2012) was heavily critical of this scene, arguing that Lori was

"reinforcing hyper-masculinity" by communicating to Maggie that unlike women, "men aren't

allowed to be emotional or sentimental" (para. 30). As the series progresses and Glenn

accumulates a higher body count, he also sheds his trademark humor and becomes more stoic,

thus conforming to the cowboy archetype.

       Although "popular cultural representations in film and television [often] confirm the

emasculated construction of the Asian American male" (Park, 2015, p. 371), Glenn is ultimately

masculinized in *The Walking Dead*. Because Rick must endorse his masculinity, however, Glenn

is forced to adopt a model of masculinity coded as White (Trujillo, 1991), thus coding himself as

White. Glenn's coding reverts to Asian with his brutal death in the season seven premiere, "The

Day Will Come When You Won't Be" (Gimple & Nicotero, 2016), which also ended Asian

American representation in *The Walking Dead*. The implications are clear: Asian American

masculinity is an alien concept, an oxymoron. For someone in *The Walking Dead* to be

considered truly masculine, they must adopt characteristics of heteronormative White

masculinity and submit to such authority if a different race. Such rules also apply to *The Walking

Dead*'s Black characters, thus drawing disturbing parallels to Trump's attempted subjugation of

African Americans.

Black Masculinity and White Power Fantasies

       Trump's relationship with the Black community is fraught to say the least, and most

readily demonstrated through his contentious statements towards African Americans. For

example, Trump's comments towards African American public figures who criticize his rhetoric

and policies, such as basketball player LeBron James and Democratic congresswomen Maxine

Waters, often carry racist undertones. Journalist Don Lemon, who interviewed James for CNN,

explained that:

> The president has called a lot of people stupid … Some of those people are white. But I
>
> would just like to note that referring to an African American as dumb — remember this is
>
> America — is one of the oldest canards of America's racist past and present: that black
>
> people are of inferior intelligence (Hayes, 2018, para. 10).

Such canards have endured in no small part due to popular entertainment. The earliest televisual

representations of African Americans portrayed the community as "happy-go-lucky social

incompetents who knew their place and whose antics served to amuse and comfort culturally

sanctioned notions of … white superiority" (Gray, 2004, p. 75). Although modern portrayals of

African Americans are less overtly caricatured, many still reinforce common stereotypes such as

materialism, ignorance, and, most eminently, Black criminality (Busselle & Crandall, 2002;

Collins, 2004; Cosby, 1994; Jackson, 2006). Persistent representation "of dangerous, typically

male, black criminals" in popular culture has assisted in the perpetuation of White supremacy by

"rationaliz[ing] the continued subjugation of African Americans following the abolition of

slavery" (McCann, 2012, p. 370). Trump himself pandered to White fears of Black criminality

throughout his presidential campaign and exaggerated crime statistics, further Othering the

African American community among his White supporters (Balko, 2018).

Unfortunately, the comparatively low number of roles for African American actors in

television minimizes the potential for normative or nuanced portrayals that would challenge such

stereotypes towards the community:

> In network television series, blacks played 6 percent of the roles in the 1960s, 8 percent
>
> in the 1970s, 12 percent in the 1990s, and 14 percent in the early 1990s (Ray, 2009, p.

112).

Despite *The Walking Dead* originally being set in Georgia, which has a high African American

population, the sole Black character in Rick's group of survivors during the show's earliest

seasons is Theodore "T-Dog" Douglas. Critics observed that T-Dog often lacked dialogue

compared to his White counterparts, particularly during season two, and was thus a largely

expendable character (Kine, 2011; Rawlings, 2011). T-Dog only enjoys a prominent role in

"Killer Within," in which he is killed off in a zombie attack that also claims Lori's life.

Additionally, the characters are shown grieving over Lori to a much greater extent than T-Dog,

further demonstrating his general peripherality within the program. T-Dog's role as the group's

sole Black character is quickly filled by Oscar, a former inmate of the prison Rick's group

settles. In the episode "Made to Suffer" (Kirkman & Gierhart, 2012), a Black family, consisting

of Tyreese Williams and his sister Sasha, arrives at the prison, which Rick's group now occupies.

At the conclusion of the episode, Oscar dies during a confrontation with the Governor's forces.

Tyreese, who never actually meets Oscar, subsequently fulfills Oscar's role at the prison. *The*

Walking Dead's casual disregard for Black characters this season was heavily criticized by

television commentators, who accused the series of "subscribing to a 'one black man at a time'

rule" (Murphy, 2015, para. 1). The practice was widely mocked on social media, with various

memes depicting T-Dog's horrified reaction upon meeting a new Black character, implying he

would soon be killed (Fang, 2013). Katherine Sugg (2015) observed that "in the first three

seasons, non-white characters largely play supporting, and usually disposable, roles" (p. 795).

Possibly in response to this backlash, a greater number of Black characters were

introduced in later seasons, including Bob Stookey, an alcoholic medic, the teenage Noah[24], and

Father Gabriel Stokes, a lapsed priest. However, the "one black man at a time" practice returned

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[24] Noah's surname is never revealed.

in season five (2014 – 2015) with the sequential deaths of Bob, Tyreese, and Noah (Murphy,

2015). Their manner of deaths is varied, with Bob being euthanized after being bitten by a

zombie, Tyreese dying from blood loss, and Noah being eaten alive. This practice of replacing

Black characters is now known among *The Walking Dead*'s fandom as "T-Dogging," due to T-

Dog setting the precedent for treatment of Black men in the series (Moyer, 2015). Furthermore,

the majority of these characters are portrayed as "woefully unempowered and wanting" (Fang,

2013, para. 15). Noah and Bob are physically weak and meek, inversions of the more

conventional portrayal of Black masculinity on mainstream television, which emphasizes their

musculature and physicality (Jackson, 2006). While Tyreese embodies this more traditional

model of Black masculinity, he is still depicted as physically and authoritatively inferior to Rick,

who is forced to subdue him in the season four episode "Isolation" (Kirkman & Sackheim, 2013)

when Tyreese becomes hysterical after the death of his girlfriend.

Through its treatment of Black men, *The Walking Dead* advances a "regressive and

problematic reinforcement of existing white male power fantasies over black masculinity" (Fang,

2013, para. 16), which parallels Trump's own attacks on Black agency. Throughout Obama's

presidency, Trump was one of the most vocal proponents of "birtherism," a conspiracy claiming

that Obama was born in Kenya, and thus not a natural U.S. citizen, and therefore should have

been ineligible to hold the office of president (Neville-Shepard & Warner, 2014). Birthers such

as Trump frequently contested Obama's leadership "in racialized and racist ways even as their

discourses attempted to mask racism under pretenses of … national integrity" (Pham, 2015, p.

89). Even after succeeding Obama as president, Trump has continued to attack Black agency by

mocking African American National Football League (NFL) players who kneel during the

national anthem at the beginning of games to protest police brutality. Trump dismissed the

players' concerns, accused them of being unpatriotic, and suggested that they even be fired

(Intravia, Piquero & Piquero, 2018). Douglas Kellner (2018) argues that Trump's "virulence and persistence of his tirades against the NFL … are overdetermined by his racial animus against African Americans who have largely been the focus of his NFL attacks to the delight of his racist base" (p. 80). Ultimately, both in *The Walking Dead* and Trump's America, Black agency is a trigger for White anxiety and must be brought to heel under White authority, thus returning to the White dominance that marked American race relations in previous decades. Unfortunately, Black women in the series do not fare much better.

Black Femininity as White Femininity's Deviant Opposite

The most prominent Black woman in *The Walking Dead*'s ensemble is Michonne, who is introduced in the season three as a main character.[25] Michonne is a former lawyer who has trained herself as a samurai to survive the apocalypse and wields a *katana* (samurai sword) for protection. Demonstrating a strong and independent nature, Michonne remains one of the most popular characters from the comic, and her introduction into the series was highly anticipated (Goldberg, 2012). Similar to her male counterparts, however, Michonne's treatment in the series is problematic. Although scholars "have examined blackness in horror[,] their study of it— even those conducted by feminist critics—has centered mostly on the textual experiences of black men" (Brooks, 2014, p. 466). The consequently limited research on Black women in horror notes that the "perceived inherent masculinity of blackness" (Halberstam, 1998, p. 228) also transfers to Black women, who in horror films often exhibit physical capability or strength that violates appropriate gender norms. This is due to cultural stereotypes that "strong Black women are the stark and deviant opposites of weak and appropriately feminine white women" (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2005, p. 31), due to their "inability to model appropriate gender behavior" (Collins, 2000, p. 76).

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[25] Michonne makes her first nonspeaking appearance in "Beside the Dying Fire," in which she is portrayed by a hooded stuntwoman.

In her debut season, Michonne largely conforms to the stereotype of the "strong Black woman." Unlike White women in *The Walking Dead*'s ensemble, Michonne is stoic almost to the point of mutism, and therefore defined entirely by her considerable muscularity and physicality. Resultantly, Michonne is both marked as masculine and an Other. While there are various traits that can establish an individual's Otherness in a community, race has historically been one of the most prominent ones (Tatum, 2000). Michonne's storyline, due to her status as an Other, largely consists of her attempting to integrate herself into Rick's group, with mixed results. Ball (2013) was disappointed with Michonne's character in the television adaptation, as she "begs for acceptance into Rick's world, opting to give away her power to Rick, who uses it at his own discretion and whim" (para 8). In the episode "Home" (Beattie & Mann, 2013), Rick and Glenn debate attacking a rival settlement with Michonne's help, while neglecting to include Michonne in the conversation at all. Ball (2013) observes that Michonne "begs for acceptance into Rick's world, opting to give away her power to Rick, who uses it at his own discretion and whim" (para. 8).

During the group's war with the Governor, Rick even considers trading Michonne in exchange for peace, due to the Governor having a grudge against Michonne. Many American narratives besides *The Walking Dead* "emphasize the centrality of men in Southern communities" (Poirot, 2015, p. 634), Rick and the Governor being such examples. The Southern United States, having previously endorsed slavery, is still largely defined by its racist history, and many of its occupants continue to possess racist leanings (Alderman & Dwyer, 2008; Poirot, 2015). In the South, African American women have suffered from numerous hate crimes, including rape and torture; such crimes "were ideologically sanctioned to enforce white supremacy" (Simien, 2011, p. 5). In *The Walking Dead*, Michonne is objectified, reduced to mere property to be bartered between two White Southern men, one of whom wishes to torture

and execute her. While Rick ultimately reconsiders and accepts Michonne into the group, this story arc demonstrates a complete and disturbing lack of racial awareness by depicting what is essentially the planned lynching of an enslaved Black woman.

Ultimately, African Americans, despite being the majority population in the state of Georgia, are largely marginalized in *The Walking Dead*, being underdeveloped in comparison to White characters and often interchangeable. According to Ball, "there is certainly a familiar hierarchy to this apocalyptic series, which appears to place white male masculinity as the highest importance" (para. 4) – the same socioracial hierarchy nostalgically fetishized by Trump and his supporters, of which there is confirmed overlap with viewers of *The Walking Dead* (Bertoni, 2016). *The Walking Dead*'s prioritizing of "white male masculinity" is particularly evident during the seventh and eighth (2017 – 2018) seasons of the series, during the group's conflict with the Saviors, who exhibit traits and ideology similar to those of Trump's alt-right supporters.

Narrative Parallels to Nationalism and the Alt-Right

The leader of the Saviors is a White man named Negan, introduced in the season six finale "Last Day on Earth" (Gimple, Negrete & Nicotero, 2016). Negan personally executes Glenn in "The Day Will Come When You Won't Be," beating him to death with a baseball bad wrapped in barbed wire. He also kills Abraham Ford, a friend of Glenn and Rick's. Despite Glenn's gruesome death, which attracted criticism for its perceived excessiveness (Adams, 2016), Negan is not explicitly racist. Glenn and Abraham's deaths are intended solely as a warning to deter Rick from fighting the Saviors, who themselves are a multiracial community. Despite this, Negan and the Saviors embody many other qualities idealized by the alt-right, including idealized, heterosexual, able-bodied masculinity. Another facet of alt-right teachings exhibited by the Saviors is their romanticized colonial subjugation of other communities deemed to be inferior and weak. Today, many White Americans view their Whiteness in relation to their

European heritage and ancestry (Krizek & Nakayama, 1995), and this is especially true of the

alt-right. Richard Spencer, a prominent White supremacist credited with coining the term "alt-

right," describes the movement as "an ideology around identity, European identity" (Wallace-

Wells, 2016, para. 4). Spencer rejects the term "White supremacist" and instead describes

himself as a "White nationalist," advocating for an exclusively White ethno-state free of

multiculturalism (May, 2017), the dominant threat to the supposed purity of White masculinity

(Oh & Kutufam, 2014).

      The Saviors' base of operations is an abandoned factory known as the Sanctuary.[26] While

Sanctuary is not an ethnocentric state, it is a nationalist state. Nationalism embodies feelings of

superiority over communities, superiority that the Saviors attempt to establish over Alexandria

through bloodshed. Joane Nagel (1998) states:

> Nationalism is both a goal – to achieve statehood, and a belief – in collective
>
> commonality. Nationalists seek to accomplish both statehood and nationhood. The goal
>
> of sovereign statehood, 'state-building', often takes the form of revolutionary or anti-
>
> colonial warfare. The maintenance and exercise of statehood vis-à-vis other nation-states
>
> often takes the form of armed conflict (p. 248).

The Saviors employ torture and murder to subjugate weaker communities, forcing them to

procure food and other resources for the Sanctuary in exchange for protection from zombies,

thus establishing a colonial power dynamic. The Ku Klux Klan conducted similar activities not

only in the Southern United States but also northern communities during the height of their

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[26] Factories are notably representative of working-class masculinity, as "hard labor in factories and mines literally uses up the workers' bodies; and that destruction, a proof of the toughness of the work and the worker, can be a method of demonstrating masculinity" (Connell, 1995, p. 36). The heavy manual work factories require "calls for strength, endurance, a degree of insensitivity and toughness, and group solitary" (p. 55). Therefore, even the Saviors' residence is symbolic of idealized alt-right masculinity.

influence (McVeigh, 2009). The Saviors' tactics therefore come off as a disturbing validation of such race-based violence.

Despite the brutality of their methods, Negan believes that only the Saviors are capable of reestablishing civilization in the world (hence their self-adopted title). Jared Taylor (2017), editor of the White supremacist magazine *American Renaissance*, argues that when White, patriarchal communities exert colonial control over other ethnic groups, it is largely motivated by a noble sense of altruism. While these ethnic groups are allowed their own territories, it is still in their best interest to be subjugated under Whiteness, as they require the guidance, knowledge, and protection that the allegedly superior White race can provide:

> And this was precisely the racist logic employed by the colonial imaginary to justify colonial and imperial violence: whiteness is understood to be humanity's "most advanced" form, and other races are ideologically coded as (at best) primitive or (at worst) dangerously obsolete, subject to disruption, displacement, and even extermination in the name of the European arc of history (Canavan, 2010, p. 439).

Negan follows a very similar logic in *The Walking Dead*. Negan and the Saviors subjugate survivor communities for precisely this reason: they are the "most advanced" survivors in the post-apocalyptic United States – superior and self-efficient warriors –while communities such as Alexandria are incapable of defending themselves against zombies. As previously stated, colonial overtones are not an uncommon feature of zombie texts, which, "like imperialistic narratives of alien invasion, repackage the violence of colonial race war in a form that is ideologically safer" (Canavan, 2010, p. 439).

Nationalist culture is largely "constructed to emphasize and resonate with masculine cultural themes. Terms like honor, patriotism, cowardice, bravery and duty are hard to distinguish as either nationalistic or masculinist, since they seem so thoroughly tied both to the

nation and to manliness" (Nagel, 1998, p. 251 – 252). Spencer, Taylor, and many in the alt-right

view themselves as American patriots, embarrassed at the perceived feminization and weakening

of the United States due to the country's increased multiculturalism. Thus, the immigrant or

racialized Other represents a similar threat to the alt-right that the weak, feminized survivor

incapable of self-defense poses in *The Walking Dead*:

> Even those inside the community have to be surveilled at all times for signs of treachery,
>
> weakness, or growing "infection." This is the second way in which the zombie infects us,
>
> besides the obvious; they infect us with their vulnerability, their killability make us
>
> "killable" too (Canavan, 2010, p. 445).

> Cynthia Enloe (1990) states that "nationalism has typically sprung from masculinized

memory, masculinized humiliation and masculinized hope" (p. 45). While the alt-right is

motivated by "masculinized humiliation" at the country's current multiculturalism, the Saviors

are motivated by "masculinized hope" at restoring American civilization. Both the alt-right and

the Saviors view White patriarchy as the foundation for their idealized, rejuvenated, re-

masculinized society, embodied respectively by Donald Trump and Negan. *Slate* senior editor

Sam Adams (2016) further parallels Trump's exaggerated masculine personas with Negan in

particular:

> Negan's highly sexualized form of brutal domination strikes a particularly ugly chord in
>
> the midst of a presidential campaign where [Trump] brags about the size of his genitalia,
>
> disparages [Clinton's] "stamina" (i.e., virility), and is accused of serial sexual assault.
>
> Negan brags about emasculating Rick, even likening Glenn and Abraham's deaths to the
>
> twin snips of a castration, and after he splatters Abraham's brains all over the clearing, he
>
> wags his blood-slickened bat in the face of Abraham's former lover, Rosita, the camera
>
> dropping to a low angle so the phallic symbolism is impossible to miss (para. 7).

Resonance Between *The Walking Dead* and Trumpian Rhetoric

Research indicates that "heavy television viewing may contribute significantly to [the] acquisition of stereotypic perceptions of behavior and psychological characteristics associated with males and females" (Freuh & McGee, 1980, p. 185). Therefore, the actions of explicitly gendered and racialized characters in *The Walking Dead* provide a rhetorical direction for extreme versions of White, patriarchal masculinity to be normalized and exalted. The zombie is a potent villain in popular American consciousness, being "both local and global, [the] cause of widespread social breakdown, gross-out consumer of flesh and spectacular destroyer of our intricately constructed social and technological fortifications" (Canavan, 2010, p. 434). In the alternate, post-apocalyptic universe of *The Walking Dead*, such a grave threat to humanity's very existence requires aggression and violent domination, which *The Walking Dead* conveys as idealized masculine traits. Notably, the cowboy embodies many of these particular attributes. Although originally popularized in western fiction, the cowboy and other western elements are common in zombie fiction, resulting from the genres' shared roots in colonialism (Hassler-Forest, 2011). Despite the cultural recognition afforded to the archetype, the American cowboy is a rebuttal towards the persisting trend of "men being under the power of women, bosses and the discipline of the workplace (Christensen & Ferree, 2008, p. 288). He is also "mythically opposed to the city, the European, [and] the gentleman," thus serving as a symbol for "opposition to modern life and modern masculinity" (p. 291). The cowboy is especially popular in White, rural communities for this exact reason, communities that swayed towards Trump out of perceived fear of marginalization and irrelevance within an increasingly multicultural and progressive country.

While the cowboy and western fiction are noted for their conservative stance towards women's agency, opposition to femininity is also present in classic horror. One of the most

conservative elements of the genre is its emphasis on hegemonic gender hierarchy, with women occupying a distinct, subordinate category to men. Because 20th century television bears significant responsibility for normalizing gender stereotypes in American society (Bacue & Signorielli, 1999), the feminist movement works "to deconstruct gender stereotypes and offer alternative visions of gender roles that emphasize equality between women and men" (Blackstone, 2003, p. 337). Although many modern horror texts have similarly expanded the genre's portrayal of gender, *The Walking Dead* does not. Because "the cowboy is associated not merely with masculinity but with American culture as such … the debate about cowboy masculinity [is] also about American nationalism" (Christensen & Ferree, 2008, p. 288). In particular, nationalist ideology often describes the nation in question as a patriarchal household, with men and women having natural, predetermined roles. Both Rick and Negan operate in such a manner, treating women as inherently weaker than men and largely relegating them to domestic duties. This is consistent with traditional expectations of "white hegemonic masculinity, [which] places white men as entitled heads of their homes and communities, as well as so-called protectors of (white) women" (Poirot, 2015, p. 642). Under such protection, women are largely deprived of any autonomy and agency, with men making choices on their behalf, regarding even their reproductive rights. Another connection between Negan in particular and the nationalism of the alt-right is that "women are relegated to minor, often symbolic, roles in nationalist movements and conflicts, either as icons of nationhood, to be elevated and defended, or as the booty or spoils of war, to be denigrated and disgraced" (Nagel, 1998, p. 244), with Negan enjoying a large harem of women culled from the Sanctuary and communities he has subjugated. Although Negan abhors sexual violence and only sleeps with consenting individuals, these women are still deprived of agency, a realization of the antifeminist ideals of the alt-right.

In *The Walking Dead*, the cowboy – an archetype explicitly coded as White (Trujillo, 1991) –is fetishized as a masculine model to emulate, but characterized by the authoritative domination it exerts over women and minority characters. Katherine Sugg (2015) argues that *The Walking Dead* thus portrays a "return to social norms of gender and racial difference that are foundational to the dominance of White men in collective life" (p. 795), not unlike Trump's campaign and presidency, which has been criticized for propagating antifeminist and White supremacist ideologies characteristic of the alt-right (Lakoff, 2017). This is not to say that the creative personnel of *The Walking Dead* have ever consciously intended such parallels. Jeffrey Dean Morgan, the actor who portrays Negan in the series, infamously tweeted "fuck you" to Trump in August 2017, denouncing the president over his reluctance to condemn violent White supremacists (Patten, 2017). Nevertheless, when considering *The Walking Dead*'s success and cultural significance, the suggestion that the most popular cable series in history could serve to promote and validate the toxic and divisive ideology of Trump and his alt-right supporters, unintentionally or not, is a disturbing notion indeed.

CHAPTER 5. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION: VISUALIZING THE TELEVISED

POLITICAL ZEITGEIST OF *BREAKING BAD* AND *THE WALKING DEAD*

Introduction

It is truly difficult to overstate the stature of television in American society. Its cultural

ubiquity is best displayed through "the fact that television sets are now in 99% of all American

households (Asamen & Berry, 2001, p. 362). In these households, "TV sets are [on average] on

for more than seven hours a day" (Levo-Henriksson, 2007, p. 106), and are left on "even when

no one is watching" (Mander, 2012). According to philosopher Carl Elliott (2003), "the average

individual American [actively] watches television for roughly four hours a day," with watching

television accounting "for nearly 40 percent of the average American's [total] free time" (p. 84).

Additionally, with the recent rise of online streaming services accessible from laptop computers

and even mobile phones, "watching television has never been [easier] and a new behavioral

phenomenon has arisen: television binge watching, [or] viewing multiple episodes of the same

television show in the same sitting" (Dombrowski, Presseau & Walton-Pattison, 2018, p, 17).

When considering the omnipresence of television in contemporary society, the question remains:

what messages do audiences derive from popular programs such as *Breaking Bad*, in which the

protagonist commits mass murder, collaborates with Neo-Nazis, and rapes his wife? For many

viewers, Walter White is a true model of masculinity for them to admire and idolize. What does

this say about the rhetorical influence of popular television, the dominant entertainment medium

of the new millennium, which has witnessed a massive resurgence in hate crimes and masculine

power norms, particularly leading up to and during the presidency of Donald Trump? What are

the telltale sociopolitical signs or indicators of this televisual consumption on American society?

Elliott suggests that although "what all this time [watching] television has done to the

American psyche is anyone's guess, […] it has helped create an alternate reality that seems both

more and less real than reality itself" (p. 84). Jerry Mander (2012) echoes Elliott's statement,

arguing that Americans "have essentially moved [their] consciousness inside media, [and] have

increasingly replaced direct contact with other people [and] other communities" with simulated

experiences (p. 206). Consequently, scholars and researchers have conducted numerous studies

into the impact on visual media and how audiences could be influenced to adopt problematic

beliefs and behaviors displayed on screen (Signorielli, 2005). In the late 1920s, "a series of

sociological and psychological inquiries [were conducted] into the effects of motion pictures on

youth" (Vasey, 1999, p. 127). The results of the Payne Fund Studies, as these inquiries came to

be known, were published in 1933 and represent the first critical study of mass media influence.

In the decades since, thousands more studies have been conducted into the identification of

characters, plots, and symbols that appear to indicate possible rhetorical influences within

popular media – this project included.

While film was the preeminent commercial entertainment medium of the 20th century, it

has, in the new millennium, since been succeeded by television.[27] The money media

conglomerates earn from their television divisions can account for more than half of their total

profits, completely surpassing the revenue earned from their film divisions. In 2011, television

provided Time Warner with 80% of its total operating income, while its film division only

provided 10% (Lang, 2012). Although television has courted increased commercial dominance

in recent decades, it has also attracted considerable controversy. Teen dramas have been

criticized for promoting casual, unprotected sex as affirmations of adulthood while failing to

address unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases (Fisher, Hill, Grube, & Gruber,

2004). LGBT television characters have been historically defined by their sexual orientation and

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[27] Both film and television display strong and seductive rhetorical invitations that can influence audiences' beliefs and values, and throughout their histories both mediums have been utilized as propaganda instruments (Hänni, 2016; Nelson, 1989).

often stereotypically portrayed as more hypersexual than their heterosexual counterparts

(Kessler, 2011). Minority television characters fare no better, with African Americans often

presented "as a homogenous, undifferentiated mass … to which recursive racist archetypes can

be attached" (Lind, 2017, p. 14) and Latino Americans presented as sexually deviant, lazy, and

unintelligent (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2005). Finally, television is often criticized for

fetishized portrayals of violence, provoking concerns that violent dramas will influence viewers

to idealize and exhibit violent behaviors themselves (Achter, 2016).

While at first glance such criticisms may seem embellished or exaggerated, they are all

rooted in legitimate concern. Popular media play a prominent role in constructing our

understanding of the world, with television and other forms of visual rhetoric influencing "the

whole range of our activities in public life: how we perform, how we see (both literally and

metaphorically), how we confront, how we resist, how we consume, how we commodify, how

we govern, and how we authorize" (Finnegan, Hope & Olson, 2008, p. 2). They also influence

gender and racial relations, establishing popular expectations of various communities. Because

of this:

> It matters profoundly what and who gets represented, what and who regularly and
>
> routinely gets left out; and how things, people, events, relationships are represented.
>
> What we know of society depends on how things are represented to us (Hall, 1986, p. 9).

As Suzanne Clark (2001) neatly summarizes, "film and other arts have a pedagogical function"

(p. 416), capable of both reflecting and changing culture. Such change is largely dependent on,

as explained by Stuart Hall, how interpersonal and intercultural relationships are portrayed on

screen.

Beginning with *The Sopranos* in 1999, prestige cable series of the new millennium's

"Golden Age of Television" has reflected the "growing [zeitgeist] of 'white masculinity in

crisis'" (Wayne, 2014, p. 206), a crisis fueled by perceived losses of privilege to women and

minority groups (Albrecht, 2016; Sepinwall, 2015). Unfortunately, by reflecting the irrational

fears among those concerned about White masculinity being marginalized and based on

indicators presented in online forums and through gender critics, contemporary Golden Age

cable dramas such as *Breaking Bad* and *The Walking Dead* have been interpreted by certain

audiences as endorsing regressive masculine values. Because there is historical precedent for

rhetorical linkage between the cultural content of popular television series and contemporary

sociopolitical movements (Watson, 1998), specific parallels can be drawn between these two

series and the current White masculinist movement that defines Trump's popularity. When

considering the mainstream appeal and perceived artistic legitimacy of not only these two series

but also cable television in its entirety, this becomes especially problematic in terms of negative

social influences.

Rhetorical Connections Between Trumpist Ideology and Prestige AMC Dramas

The cable boom of the 1980s witnessed the birth of many culturally enduring television

channels.[28] MTV, which originally launched in 1981, targeted young male viewers and enjoyed

strong ratings, proving that niche programming could be commercially successful. Lifetime,

which launched three years later, has similarly enjoyed success with women-led programming

and even adopted the tagline "Television for Women" in 1993 to embrace its niche demographic

target, although the slogan has since been discontinued (Hundley, 2002). AMC, which also

launched in 1984, initially appealed to older audiences with its collection of classic films. The

channel expanded into original programming during the 2000s in an effort to better compete in

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[28] A principal factor that aided the spread of cable television in the United States was the
country's social development. American families gradually began drifting away from shared
social activities, such as watching television together, instead placing emphasis on their
individual schedules (Hindman & Wiegand, 2008). The social complexities that splintered the
nuclear American family paved the way for cable television's success, as cable channels could
appeal to individual groups based on age, sex, or niche interests (Baker, 2007).

the competitive television market, with a particular focus on darker, edgier dramas aimed

primarily at male audiences. AMC's first original drama was *Mad Men*, which premiered in 2007

and focused on morally ambiguous Madison Avenue advertising executives in the 1960s and

explored the counterculture of the decade. *Mad Men* was a critical success that earned numerous

awards and established AMC's reputation as a prestige channel (Fennessey, 2015). *Mad Men*'s

success paved the way for *Breaking Bad* and *The Walking Dead*, AMC's second and third

original dramas, both similarly aimed at older male audiences and popularly reviewed as

defining texts of television's modern Golden Age (Damico & Quay, 2016; Sepinwall, 2015).

As this new "Golden Age" endured, national debate centered on social mores:

reproductive rights, ethnic opportunity, and immigration in a post-9/11 world. The progressive

left enjoyed greater popular support in many of these debates, and the election of Barack Obama,

a Black man, was seen by many as a substantial blow to not only conservative hegemony in the

United States, but also White racial hegemony (Enck-Wanzer, 2011; Johnson, 2017). During

Obama's presidency, progressivism enjoyed further victories as new legal precedents were set in

place to protect women and minority groups, which only exacerbated the feelings of

marginalization many White American men were experiencing.[29] Such feelings were explored in

AMC's triumvirate of flagship series, with masculine angst manifesting in *Breaking Bad* and *The

Walking Dead* through the violent, oppressive actions of their protagonists, particularly towards

women and minorities. However, as queried by Douglas Howard (2010), even if audiences are

meant to condone these characters' actions, does simply watching these dramas put viewers "in

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[29] Ironically, Obama's election is often cited as evidence for the newfound emergence of a post-racial America, where racism is no longer the barrier it once was to minorities. Post-racism is recognized as a political strategy, minimizing or even outright denying the continued existence of racism and its effects. Championing the existence of post-racism in the United States allows racist practices to continue under the newfound cover of political justification, while those who enact such practices are able to plausibly deny their own racial biases (Ono, 2011). Playing to type, Trump asserts that allegations of racism are merely attempted slander by his political rivals (Fisher, 2016).

an uncomfortable position, as if any enjoyment that we get from the show[s] at all amounts to complicity on our part? If we watch, doesn't our watching amount to endorsement?" (p. xvii).

According to prominent film theorist and feminist scholar Laura Mulvey (1999a, 1999b), the answer to both of these questions is yes. Mulvey's research examines how film audiences view women through a psychoanalytic approach, citing films such as Alfred Hitchcock's seminal classic *Rear Window*.[30] Mulvey states that because popular media reflect the values of patriarchal society, women have been historically marginalized and sexually objectified in media texts, their primary purpose being to provide male viewers with voyeuristic pleasure, while men in the same texts are empowered and their actions justified.[31] In the case of *Breaking Bad*, Walter White justifies his actions to himself – and the online fans of Team Walt – because he is shown to suffer relatable injustices that finally pushed him over the edge, specifically his lack of financial security, which in his eyes is entirely emasculating. Thus, his primary goal in *Breaking Bad* is that of masculine validation:

> A growing body of literature demonstrates the lengths to which men will go to reassert their masculinity when it is called into question. In response to such gender identity challenges, researchers have found that men are more likely to sexually harass [women] and become physically aggressive (Carian & Sobotka, 2018, p. 1).

Walt displays such behavior in his quest to symbolically reclaim his masculinity, particularly through his domination of Skyler. While *Breaking Bad* condemns the exaggerated masculine

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[30] Mulvey's theory of the "male gaze" builds upon psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's concept of the gaze. It refers to the anxiousness individuals experience upon realizing they can be viewed by other individuals or groups. Lacan developed the concept as an extension to his psychoanalytic theory of the mirror stage, when infants encounter a mirror and realize that they possess an external appearance (Manlove, 2007). Mulvey was the first to apply the Lacanian gaze, at least prominently, to gender studies through a feminist framework.

[31] The majority of directors, producers, and executives in the entertainment industry are heterosexual White men, who deliberately exert their influence to reinforce these tropes and cater to male audiences (Mulvey, 1999a).

persona Walt adopts through various textual elements, Team Walt saw the toxic traits of his alter

ego Heisenberg, particularly his domination of women and minorities, as representing a

legitimate, idealized model of masculinity (Clarke, 2017; Cowlishaw, Cowlishaw, Dawe,

Gerlich, Gross, Johnston & Pettis, 2015). Television has a long history of prioritizing hegemonic

and toxic masculinities (Arellano, 2015), but the fragile, overcompensating White masculinities

exhibited in *Breaking Bad* and *The Walking Dead* deserve particular attention when considering

modern historical context. How do such portrayals of masculinity resonate with trends and

movements in the current American sociopolitical arena, especially as masculine validation was

similarly the goal of many voters in the 2016 presidential election?

Like how Heisenberg is a product of Walt's masculine performance, Trump projected a

similarly exaggerated model of masculinity during his campaign (Lakoff, 2017), one

characterized by aggressive and dismissive rhetoric towards women and minorities. This macho

performance attracted unprecedented support from White male voters, who viewed Trump's

potential victory in the election as way to symbolically reaffirm their masculinity against what

they perceived to be further marginalization due to women's rights and multiculturalism (French,

2016). The prospect of Hillary Clinton's election as President of the United States embodied the

ultimate threat of this supposed marginalization:

> Because femininity is subordinate to masculinity and they feel they have more to lose,
>
> men feel more compelled to overcompensate in the face of gender identity threat than
>
> women … As such, men's responses to threats to their masculinity can largely be
>
> understood as attempts to regain their status by realigning themselves with what they
>
> believe to be this socially idealized form of masculinity (Carian & Sobotka, 2018, p. 1 –
>
> 2).

Besides *Breaking Bad*, *The Walking Dead* also "manifested the anxieties of a post-white society and the re-exertion of white (masculine) sovereignty" (Watts, 2017, p. 9). Culture critics have noted that a common element of zombie narratives is governmental collapse, with the surviving elements of "the state and its weaponized forces of social control" commonly utilized as antagonists (Watts, 2017, p. 9), exerting totalitarian authority upon survivors. To many viewers, "fantasies involving [a] war with the U.S. government are powerful sources of enjoyment (and identity formation)" (p. 9). When *The Walking Dead* premiered in 2010, the American government was headed by Obama, who was viewed by many White Americans as a racially suspect Other that had infiltrated and corrupted the country's infrastructure (Enck-Wanzer, 2011). Such prejudice fanned birtherism, which originated online among fringe theorists but was introduced to mainstream political discourse partly through Trump.

Birtherism was not the only bigoted movement to grow and thrive online. Shortly after Obama was inaugurated as president in 2009, the Southern Poverty Law Center, a nonprofit legal advocacy group, reported that "militiamen, white supremacists, anti-Semites, nativists, tax protesters and a range of other activists of the radical right" were coalescing on the quickly expanding Internet (Klein, 2012, p. 428 – 429). During Obama's presidency, conspiracy theorists espoused radical rhetoric and expressed concern that "under a non-white president, whites would have to occupy previously minoritarian subject positions" (Johnson, 2017, p. 18), a widespread fear that contributed to an increase of hate groups in the country (Severson, 2012). Such racial anxiety and resentment directly enabled Trump's rise to prominence in the political arena, with Trump appealing to such racial fears, suspicions, and prejudices to mass popular support for his presidential campaign, emboldening such fringe groups and contributing to their recent mainstream exposure. While the Internet has emerged as a haven for far right extremism over the past decade, this is not limited to politically motivated groups, with *Breaking Bad*'s Team Walt

community primarily existing online. Ultimately, Trump's rhetoric espouses the same values and

attitudes that motivate Heisenberg and are glorified by Team Walt: the reassertion of masculine

dominance and hegemony, particularly over those viewed as inferior to White masculinity.

The United States, like any society, is hierarchal, constituted of different communities

developed around various social classifications such as race, with these classes being organized

in relation to each other based on privilege (Burke, 1950). The United States has functioned as a

White hegemonic society since its inception, as citizenship and political rights, such as voting,

initially belonged exclusively to White men. American national identity could only be claimed

by White individuals, who widely viewed minorities as belonging to another, separate identity.

Centuries later, there are still "many voices [claiming] that true American identity belong[s] to

white people, or even white Christians, exclusively" (Zeskind, 2014, p. 113). Despite Trump's

protestations, it is clear that to many Americans, his candidacy represented a commitment to

Whiteness, a return to the status quo, a rebuttal to the increased multiculturalism of the United

States. Such ideology is evident in Trump's own rhetoric, which throughout his campaign was

heavily racialized and invited his supporters to adopt a heightened sense of White supremacist

ideology, as well as emboldening those who already held such views, such as the alt right.

Trump's infamous campaign promise to build a fortified barrier wall along the United States-

Mexico border has similarly been embraced by the alt right and other nativist groups. Trump's

sweeping characterization of Mexican immigrants as gang members, drug dealers, and sexual

deviants has emboldened racist actions against not only Latino immigrants, but also Latino

Americans. The United States has witnessed a dramatic increase in the number of hate crimes

against various minorities following Trump's victory in the general election (Sgueglia, Walker &

Yan, 2016). The Ku Klux Klan, one of the most prominent White supremacist hate groups in the

country, has also experienced record membership, with spokespersons explicitly attributing "the

KKK's boost in membership [to] Trump's rhetoric" (Sanchez, 2018, p. 45).

Although the protagonists of *Breaking Bad* and *The Walking Dead* never verbalize such

explicitly prejudiced ideology, these series display elements of the tendentious rhetoric that

would earn Trump unforeseen popularity and ultimately the office of president. In contrast to

Trump's verbal rhetoric, however, *Breaking Bad* and *The Walking Dead* exemplify visual

rhetoric, analyses of which consider "how images work alone and collaborate with other

elements to create an argument designed for moving a specific audience (Buchanan-Oliver &

Bulmer, 2006, p. 55). By using *Breaking Bad* and *The Walking Dead* as case studies, this project

makes a direct connection to television viewership and personality to display how televisual

entertainment resonated with the specific audience of Trump's base and platform. *Breaking Bad*

and *The Walking Dead*, being – respectively – the most critically and commercially successful

cable series ever produced, enjoy considerable visibility and influence. Resultantly, it is worth

analyzing how Trump's most bigoted supporters perceived their prejudicial views heightened

and broadcast for the world –whether intended by the producers or not – thus empowering and

validating their own beliefs. For example, the visual imagery in *Breaking Bad* and *The Walking*

Dead seems likely to have affected viewer polysemy by producing rhetorical invitations that

allow these audiences to interpret narrative elements as similarly racist. In *Breaking Bad*, Walter

White could be viewed as exemplifying the presumed racial superiority of Whiteness in how he

comes to violently dominate Albuquerque's drug trade, which is largely composed of Latino

American criminals. In *The Walking Dead*, Black bodies are portrayed as interchangeable and

subservient to the authority of White masculinity, embodied primarily by Rick Grimes.

Besides maintaining dominance over racialized Others in their respective series through

threats of violent force, Walt and Rick also display attitudes indicative of misogyny and gender

stereotyping. Demetriou explains that "power relationships between genders and within genders in the current Western gender order are centered [on] the global dominance of men over women, [which] provides the main basis for relationships among men that define a hegemonic form of masculinity" (Demetriou, 2001, p. 344). Such relationships are normalized through popular media, which have historically restricted women to sexualized supporting roles defined primarily by their relationships with men (Bacue & Signorielli, 1999). Although feminist scholars continue to explore "how texts in popular culture can open space to renegotiate masculinity in ways contributing to the dismantling of gendered social power structures" (Prody, 2015, p. 444), *Breaking Bad* and *The Walking Dead* continue to support these preexisting power structures – power structures that many of Trump's supporters believe he can reinvigorate and restore (Raeburn, 2016).

To demonstrate the rhetorical similarities between *Breaking Bad* and *The Walking Dead* and Trumpist ideology, this project employs a wide breadth of theories and methods. For its theoretical framework, this project utilizes intersectionality and critical race theory. Intersectionality highlights intragroup differences and demonstrates how separate categories of identity can be combined to produce unique forms of discrimination (Crenshaw 1989, 1991). Intersectionality is particularly applicable in contemporary Whiteness studies, as many lower-class White men specifically support Trump because they harbor irrational fears of marginalization and view him as a crusader for Whiteness, despite White masculinity maintaining its historical status as the country's dominant societal category (Aytaç, Rau & Stokes, 2016). When considering the fraught racial dynamics that resulted in Trump's election, critical race theory is also a key element of this project. Critical race theory is used to examine the relationship between race and hegemonic power structures (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Wing, 2016). Because these power structures often favor Whiteness, scholars often use critical

race theory to research the impact of White hegemonic privilege upon racial minorities

(Rodriguez, 1999; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Critical race theory is also commonly used to

identify "the ways in which race [is] constructed and represented in … American society as a

whole" (Crenshaw, 1995, p. xiii).

Mass media, such as popular television, are particularly influential towards societal

notions of race (Dates, 1993). This is indicative of critical discourse analysis, which suggests that

media discourse influences "people's knowledge, attitudes, and ideologies" (Ansari,

Asadollahzadeh & Sharifi, 2016, p. 46) and serves as an "instrument of the social construction of

reality" (van Leeuwen, 1993, p. 193). Because of the ideological influence of television, this

project's methodology needed to analyze television episodes from critical/cultural studies

perspectives. In addition to critical discourse analysis, another method utilized for this project is

critical historiography, a mixed-methods approach that combines textual analysis and historical

analysis to examine how the secondary meanings of media texts reflect the greater sociocultural

trends during the time periods in which they were produced (Armstrong, 2006; Godfrey, 2006).

Rhetorical criticism is a specific subform of textual analysis used to identify these secondary

meanings, which often take the forms of persuasive messages; these messages can be intended

by the authors of a text or wholly inadvertent (Jasinski, 2001). Visual rhetoric thus serves as a

lens that further enriches our awareness and critique of visual cues and symbols, and how

cultural texts such as popular television series can convey political ideologies (Watts, 2017).

Through application of visual rhetorical criticism, critical discourse analysis, and elements of

critical historiography, this project identifies how *Breaking Bad* and *The Walking Dead* contain

messages directly relating to the sociopolitical zeitgeist of "white masculinity in crisis" (Wayne,

2014, p. 206), interrogates how these messages have been misinterpreted by select audiences as

promoting a return to regressive models of masculinity, and links this phenomena to the

resurgence of White supremacy and misogyny within the American sociopolitical arena.

Conclusion

In its first century of existence, television produced a massive impact on the world. It is a

vital tool for news and communication. Television has the power to educate children, as

demonstrated by series such as *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* (Hines & Levin, 2003), *Sesame*

Street, and *Bill Nye the Science Guy*, as well as adults, with series on the cable network Travel

Channel exposing audiences to new cultures across the globe (Hall, 1999). For all the

controversy television has accumulated throughout its history regarding its supposed moral

deviance, even fictional televisual narratives can be utilized to promote wholesome values. S.T.

Karnick (2010) observes that contemporary television series frequently acknowledge the

consequences of immoral actions committed by their protagonists, one example being how

sexual promiscuity and infidelity destroy intimate relationships. Karnick argues that television

can have a positive influence on audiences by promoting values associated with happiness and

success. Such values, however, are not necessarily associated with either *Breaking Bad* or *The*

Walking Dead, the two most prominent cable series in television history. Although these two

series ostensibly critique masculine entitlement, contemporary television production as a whole

continues to struggle "between innovative, socially conscious, counterhegemonic programming

on one side and safe, stereotypical, hegemonic programming on the other" (Polletta &

Tomlinson, 2014, p. 530). Despite the reoccurring critiques of toxic masculinity in popular

prestige television, structural factors in the entertainment industry continue to be skewed towards

the "male gaze" as described by Mulvey. Therefore, such series may still fetishize certain

elements associated with toxic masculinity, such as physical violence and the sexual

objectification of women:

Television producers are driven not only to avoid risk, but also to make imitation seem

like innovation. Driven by the relentless demand for high ratings, they want to produce

something that is original, new, edgy, something that pushes the envelope, that is out of

the box, that creates buzz. If "edgy" means skirting the boundary between appropriate

and inappropriate, edgy television may veer [towards] provocative, but by no means

counterhegemonic [content] (p. 530).

Due to these ideological contradictions, "edgy" series such as *Breaking Bad* and *The Walking
Dead* may have invited some audiences to interpret the toxic masculine models they were

purportedly critiquing as actually representing new hegemonic standards, thus inspiring certain

male viewers to reestablish what they perceived as White masculinity's "natural" dominance

over women and minorities – a mission widely interpreted as a core objective of Trump's

campaign and presidency (Raeburn, 2016).

In conclusion, identity politics are often divisive, as identities such as class, race, and sex

in the United States are not often discussed in public arenas in concomitance. This lack of

intersectional conversation consequently perpetuates intergroup tensions by exaggerating

differences rather than reconciling them, differences that Trump's rhetoric has capitalized on and

exploited. These continued tensions prevent collective social actions, thus preserving the status

quo, particularly the privilege of elites, White or otherwise. Instead, public conversations

regarding such inequities should view factors of identity as working in conjunction, rather than

in opposition. Because mass media wields considerable cultural and social influence, it is

entirely possible for such conversations to be carried out in the realm of popular television.

While some series, such as *Modern Family*, *Black-ish* and *Fresh Off the Boat*, contribute to these

conversations, others, such as *Breaking Bad* and *The Walking Dead* cater to the continued

existence of White privilege and supremacy, thus resonating with Trump's rhetoric and actions

as president. Ultimately, this project connects the regressive portrayal of women and minorities in *Breaking Bad* and *The Walking Dead* to large social trends and polysemic interpretations among audiences, particularly viewers who support Trump, and demonstrates how these series reflect the current American sociocultural zeitgeist during Trump's presidential campaign, election, and early years of his administration. Indeed, there is more than just political musing in how Cherrez (2017) likens Donald Trump to Walter White: close readings of *Breaking Bad* and *The Walking Dead* confirm not only that the series' treatment of male protagonists encouraged a twisted kind of respect and admiration for villainous men in popular culture, but also surprisingly direct resonance of entertainment depictions with sociopolitical rhetoric coming from Trump and his supporters.

This is not to say that the research is finished, however. This project largely consists of qualitative research, in particular close readings of *Breaking Bad* and *The Walking Dead*, supplemented by critical reviews of individual episodes. Further directions for research could incorporate quantitative methodology through the use of surveys among viewers and self-identified fans of both series. These surveys could investigate how viewers personally perceived the themes and messages of both series, thus reinforcing the original findings of this project through empirical data. Gender and feminist scholars could also expand on this project for further feminist critique. The intersectional criterion of class cam be expanded upon in future studies to explore the appeal that both Trump himself and hypermasculine television series such as *Breaking Bad* and *The Walking Dead* have across different socioeconomic classes. Furthermore, there is considerable research potential in exploring the historical progression of televised violence and its severity to today, and connect it to Trump's own promotion of violence during his rallies. More specifically, this research can be used to rethink the "spectacle of masculinity" in Trumpian times. From a critical perspective, the spectacle describes "ideology

materialized in actual social relations" (Garlick, 2016, p. 177). Although "men's violence has always been central to the society of the spectacle" (p. 188), televisual portrayals of masculine violence upon women and minorities deserves greater focus in a period defined by White masculinist movements such as the alt-right.

This project's contributions also strengthen the rationale for future critical and cultural studies into visual rhetoric in popular media that cater or challenge the sort of White nationalist ideology currently exhibited and enabled by the President of the United States. Although Trump's supporters defend his prejudiced rhetoric as "telling it like it is" (Shafer, 2017, p. 3), Trump tendency to "tell it like is" simply normalizes discriminatory thinking, with prejudiced Americans newly empowered to openly communicate racist and sexist speech and reclaim what they perceive to be White masculinity's natural hegemony. Unfortunately, it is easy for such audiences to view *Breaking Bad*, *The Walking Dead*, and other popular television series as endorsing this toxic notion, rather than challenging it.

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