

The Walking Dead: Michonne, Tropes, and Exploitation

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Abstract:

The Walking Dead has become a staple in the zombie genre with almost 200 issues of comics and a televised adaptation, in 2018, airing its eighth season. Inspired by George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), Robert Kirkman has created a fictional zombie series that captures human relationships as the characters try to survive flesh-eating zombies and human antagonists. The focus of this project is on the only prominent black woman in the text, Michonne. She is the katana-wielding involuntary *superwoman* to Rick Grimes's band of the survivors. Michonne, though, a revolutionary character for the genre, is bound by tropes of the nineteenth century, as the origins of zombies and slavery follow her as she navigates through Kirkman's zombie land of white privilege.

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Since 2003, *The Walking Dead*, written by Robert Kirkman, has enticed viewers with Rick Grimes, the protagonist of the comic and leader of a band of survivors who struggle to overcome both walkers (zombies) and the fall of humanity. *The Walking Dead* is set in the area of Atlanta, Georgia where readers witness Rick and fellow survivors attempt to create their version of community while dealing with walkers, the lack of shelter, and the constant hunt for supplies. While walkers appear to be their greatest adversary, it becomes clear that fellow human antagonists are their real threat. *The Walking Dead* has become a paramount text in the comic and zombie genre, as it explores human connection, economics, race, and gender in a dystopian plot. With nearly 200 issues of comics and a televised adaptation airing its eighth season as of 2018, the zombie figure, which has intrigued viewers for years, emphasizes the struggles to remain human and triumph in the face of continuous death and destruction. Although first a comic sensation, *The Walking Dead* smashed into viewers' living rooms and became a phenomenon with television ratings bringing in more than five million in its series premier—and more than eleven million as of its current eighth season premier.¹ Since its inception, it has inspired dedicated fan blogs, cosplay, Comic-con, and merchandising from video games to figurines, cementing *The Walking Dead* as a staple in the zombie genre.

The zombie craze, however, started long before *The Walking Dead*. Society's fascination with zombies can be traced back to 1932 with "Kenneth Webb's stage production *Zombie*, and...the first zombie film, *White Zombie*" (McIntosh 4). According

¹ Tassi, Paul. "The Walking Dead's Season 8 Premiere Ratings Dropped 33% From Last Year". Forbes, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/insertcoin/2017/10/27/the-walking-deads-season-8-premiere-ratings-dropped-33-from-last-year/>. Accessed 17 March 2018.

to McIntosh the main function of the zombie was to be controlled by a master, but George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), changed the traditional zombie narrative. McIntosh explains that Romero was influenced by traditional zombies and even 1950s comic books, inspiring him to take creative liberties in *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), where he "liberated the zombie from the shackles of a master and invested his zombies not with a function (a job or task such as zombies were standardly given by voodoo priest), but rather a drive (eating flesh)" (qtd. McIntosh 8). Since, Hollywood creatives have followed Romero's steps and taken their own creative liberties with films such as, *Resident Evil* (2002), *Dawn of the Dead* (2004), *Zombieland* (2009), and *World War Z* (2013). These films and others have transformed the way zombies are presented, from their speed to metaphorical meanings, and they continue to push the idea that human connection is what drives zombie narratives (Bishop *American Gothic* 95; Bishop *Triumph* 4; Moreman and Rushton 6). Films (specifically Romero's) and examinations of human relationships is what inspired Kirkman's *The Walking Dead*. In the book *We're All Infected: Essays on AMC's The Walking Dead and the Fate of the Human*, Dave Beisecker details Kirkman's admiration of Romero: "Kirkman freely acknowledges his debt to the creator of the modern zombie" (Beisecker). The evidence of his admiration can be traced throughout his comic, as "Kirkman pays homage to Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* in the very first issue" (Beisecker), by naming Morgan's son Duane, which is also a character in Romero's movie. Beisecker notes that "in another nod to *Night of the Living Dead*, Kirkman also opted to print the comic in black and white." While movies remain the main inspiration behind the comics' creation, comics too, have transformed and diversified zombie narratives overtime, with titles such as *I Am a*

Hero by Kengo Hanazawa, about a zombie apocalypse in Japan. Even *Archie* comics have put their own spin using the zombie narrative in *Afterlife with Archie*, where zombies invade Riverdale. Video games such as *Left 4 Dead* (2008) and *Call of Duty: Zombies* (2009) also have fed the craze, propelling the zombie phenomenon further.

As zombie movies were a major inspiration to the creator, the zombie figure and its impact, cinematically and culturally, provide a framework for the inspiration of *The Walking Dead*, both in terms of its artistry and its plot devices. Kyle William Bishop describes the public's ongoing interest as a "zombie renaissance" (*Popular Culture* 5), given a steady increase in the number of films, TV, video games, fiction, and scholarship about zombies and their underlying meaning and how they are used to frame and problematize social and cultural issues. In her introduction "We're All Infected" in her book *"We're all Infected": Essays on AMC's The Walking Dead and the Fate of the Human*, Dawn Keetley details the various shifts of zombies and their metaphorical meanings. She begins with notable zombie movies from the 1930s through the 1940s where "Despite their curious erasure of racial slavery, these first white zombies nonetheless embodied anxieties about loss of autonomy and about one person's dominion over another" (Keetley), and she continues on with filmmaker Romero's movies shifting zombies' meaning to embody humans' anxieties of mortality and "escalating violence of the world" (Keetley). Since then, the shift of zombies' metaphorical meanings can be traced to more current political and social anxieties as (Boyer 1139; Platts 551; Bishop *Triumph* 6; Greene and Meyer 68) all note 9/11 and global wars on terrorism, in addition to the spread of viruses and technology, as paramount contexts and rationales for contemporary zombie narratives.

The fear of losing control creates unease about the present and the future, allowing the creation of the *other* (whether it be a thing, biological virus, or a world event) to form unrest within society and place blame and stigma onto those that diverge from societal norms. This stigma that is coined *other* when discussing zombies metaphorically is code for marginalized, oppressed, and sometimes lower class, as Keetley states that although “some zombies have been vast as able to restrain the urge to devour us, they thus stand in for more human and recognizable others—the oppressed and the marginalized.” That is, even though humans fear uncontrollable events, they also suffer from an internalized fear of the *other* and becoming *othered*. But to discuss zombies and unearth the sociocultural meaning behind the term *other*, along with its impact on today’s culture and its influence over the zombie genre including *The Walking Dead*, one must understand the history and racial connections that zombies hold.

The origin of zombies are linked with slavery. According to Bishop:

West African and Congolese mythologies describe the zombi as a “corpse” or a “body without a soul.” This ancient belief was likely transformed when abducted slaves were exposed to the Christian concept of resurrection—a body returned from the grave—and the ideologies of colonial enslavement—bodies lacking freedom and autonomy (*Popular Culture* 7).

The fear of eternal enslavement has enabled the zombie figure to remain relevant over the years, because the idea of subjugation continues to be an underlying fear in society, however, the context and metaphorical meanings (debt, work, family) can simply change with the political or social climate. While the metaphors and allegories regarding zombies shift with time and creativity, the history remains relevant despite zombie narratives

distancing itself from its origins. This is what makes *The Walking Dead* so intriguing, though in reference of time it is far removed from zombies' original history in comparison to its predecessors, it appears to purposely place coded undertones that date back to slavery.

The zombie figure can be traced back through early history as colonial figures chronicled the slaves fear of eternal enslavement. In *Slaves, Cannibals, and Infected Hyper-Whites: The Race and Religion of Zombies*, Elisabeth McAlister notes:

The word zonbi appears in writing as far back as colonial Saint-Domingue, glossed by travel writer Moreau de Saint-Méry (1787) as the slaves' belief in a returned soul, a revenant. 20th century reports describe not a returned soul but a returned body- a person bodily raised from the grave and turned into a slave worker (459).

Once again, the idea of returning to be forever enslaved creates a binding link to slavery and the zombie figure. Though zombie narratives have, in some cases, moved from the metaphorical meaning of zombies to focus on the human connection between characters, this linkage of zombie and slavery remains an undertone due to the treatment of black characters in the genre and how they continue to be characterized as *othered*, especially in *The Walking Dead*. So despite race rarely being mentioned in the comic, racial undertones remain evident in the problematic characterizations with the use of stereotypes and tropes that follow black characters into Kirkman's zombie land. Even if Kirkman attempted to erase the zombies bond to slavery, it, in-return moves from racial invisibility to sensationalizing racial bodies.

Shawn McIntosh offers further insight by describing two types of zombies in Haitian folklore. He details spirit zombies “*zombie jardin*” (2) and then “*zombi corps cadáver*” (2). He details how the “*zombi corps cadáver* is the zombie figure most notably found in popular culture, where the “body raises from the dead” (2). This particular zombie figure has become the greatest fear for the survivors in the comic. Mikel J. Koven in “Folklore of the Zombie Film” notes the idea of being *othered* and “losing one’s free will, of *becoming* a zombie rather than meeting the monster itself” (30), is a common theme that continue to link zombie films to Haitian folklore. The concept of losing free will connects slavery to *The Walking Dead* black characters even further, because they, too, are battling losing themselves to the colonial atmosphere they are forced in, along with the lack of diversity and white leadership that becomes the default. Thus, the zombie figure unleashes the fear of losing control of oneself and/or being forever enslaved, which remains the underlying and horrific link of zombies and slavery that are embedded in *The Walking Dead*.

The long-lasting allure of zombies is it can manifest itself to fit into any current metaphorical fears of society at that moment. What was once a fear of slaves to be reincarnated into soulless beings for eternity has since shifted to fears about the end of the world. Zombie critic Bishop explains, in *How Zombies Conquered Popular Culture: The Multifarious Walking Dead in the 21st Century*, that zombies during 9/11 exhibited the public’s fear of *other* infringing on their safety, and this fear of *other* and the need to isolate to survive has continued to seep into our political and cultural ideologies (Bishop 5). He contends, “One of the primary reasons the zombie renaissance was even possible was the world’s collective fears and anxieties about terrorist attacks and global

pandemics" (14). Bishop continues by describing how modern zombies are "meaning machines" and "allegories" (5) that allow media to showcase these fears fictionally. He contends "films of the twentieth century, our new-era zombies allow us to continue our struggles with race, gender, sexual identity, religion, and class, not to mention our ongoing critiques of failed political policies and a collapsing economy" (14). Therefore, racial issues did not disappear with time, nor are they erased in *The Walking Dead* because, despite lacking diversity (which itself implies racial undertones), there are problematic stereotypes and tropes filtered throughout the text towards characters of color.

Characterizations, especially in regard to the black characters, in *The Walking Dead* is directly correlated to social and cultural history. So, acknowledging and understanding that slavery is still embedded in the United States's national narrative as it continues to show aftereffects through systematic racism is vital in understanding why black characters are either killed off or never gain leadership in the comic. For example, there appears to be a limit to the amount of prominent black male characters permitted in the comic's storyline at once. We meet Morgan briefly in the beginning when Rick awakens from his coma astray and searching for his family. Morgan assists Rick in his journey to find his family but is soon forgotten as the story follows Rick. Shortly after, Tyreese is introduced with a hammer, reminiscence of the mythic John Henry figure, and is later decapitated. His death allows Morgan to cycle back into the plot, unhinged mentally, and he too, eventually dies, which evokes the magical negro trope¹. Rick and

¹ "Magical Negro." The Magical Negro really seems to have no goal in life other than helping white people achieve their fullest potential; he may even be ditched or killed outright once he's served that purpose. If

Morgan's relationship (as evidence in Rick's relationship with other black characters) shows how Rick uses him as a vehicle for his survival. Heckman states:

The Morgan/Rick relationship illustrates fundamental aspects of American economic identity that are seldom acknowledged. Whites "consume" African Americans as commodities, marginalize them as full citizens, exploit them for their labor, and absorb them into "mainstream" middle-class, white culture (Heckman).

This relationship based on "consumption" of the black characters in *The Walking Dead* is an ongoing theme. While death is unavoidable in a zombie apocalypse, having the few black characters either dying and/or their existence being based on what the white protagonist can gain reveals the blatant racism inherent in the comic. For instance, Morgan's death made room for King Ezekiel, the leader of another community, called The Kingdom. King Ezekiel ultimately meets his demise when Rick and the survivors discover his head on a stake, along with the only prominent Latina character, Rosita. Their stories barely, if ever, overlap as they are recycled to uphold Rick Grimes's white male leadership. This shows, despite the lack of dialogue addressing race, that blackness still remains a threat within the social order, even in a world filled with flesh eating zombies.

Films, television, and books, no matter the genre, are often used as commentary to our society. Therefore, since media often mirrors society, examining a text like *The*

he does express any selfish desires, it will only in the context of helping the white protagonist realize their own racism and thereby become better people. <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/MagicalNegro>.

Walking Dead is valuable in understanding how it implies stereotypes derived from the 19th century will live on during a zombie apocalypse in the 21st century, indicating how society still navigates based on white privilege. The characterization of black characters in *The Walking Dead* reveal how this contemporary zombie narrative reinscribes historical forms of oppression of racism, showing that the *other* in the comic is not just zombies, but people of color.

Zombie: The Code for Other:

The fear of the *other* has been consisted throughout history and does not only apply to zombies. It now serves as metaphor for the undesirables of society. Gerry Canavan writes about this fear in *We Are the Walking Dead: Race, Time, and Survival in Zombie Narrative*:

This is what we do, whenever zombies strike: we build fortifications, we hoard even, and most tragically supplies, we “circle the wagons” and point our guns outward. And we do this, when the zombies don’t exist, when outside the walls there are only other people just like us (448).

Society shuns what has been labeled *other* due to the fear of too becoming ostracized. Thus, this constant fear of *other* infringing on our safety, economy, or changing the norm is what keeps shows like *The Walking Dead* relevant. Therefore, it is necessary to read this zombie narrative with an intersectional lens, where history of zombie metaphors/allegories or tropes are not ignored, but examined to understand the characterization and storylines within *The Walking Dead*.

Generally, the main interest in zombie stories is about the human connection (Bishop *American Gothic* 95; Bishop *Triumph* 4; Moreman and Rushton 6). Viewers watch *Zombieland* to see if Columbus gets the girl, or invested in the comic *Afterlife with Archie* to see how Archie copes with his best friend, Jughead, becoming both a zombie and a spirit, and the same goes for *The Walking Dead*. One of its most compelling aspects is its ability to go beyond epic zombie battles to focus on the emotional connections among survivors. Kirkman believes quality zombie narratives are less about the zombie figure and more about human emotions and the current state of humanity. He explains:

To me the best zombie movies aren't the splatter feasts of gore and violence with goofy characters and tongue and cheek antics. Good zombie movies show us how messed up we are, they make us question our station in society...and our society station in the world (qtd. Canavan 434-435).

This concept is formed at the start of *The Walking Dead* comic when Rick awakens from a coma to discover that he is alone. He then spends all his efforts to reunite with his family, displaying from the start that human connection is primary and the threat of zombies is secondary. But as the comic progresses, it also displays the characters' "stations" in their new, yet archaic, society. Rick, for example, the white heteronormative male, establishes his dominance and leadership based off of societies norm of placing white males as dominant overseers, as the fellow survivors simply fall in line, when Rick shows up in full deputy gear, just after losing his horse to a herd of zombies, right before Glenn, a docile Asian who delivered pizza prior to the apocalypse, saves him and brings him to his family. Kirkman, through visual cues and traditional societal norms, is

establishing Rick's default leadership through western ideals of manhood, dominance, and even occupation.

The Walking Dead follows Rick's journey to search for his wife, Lori, and their son, Carl. Their reunion marks the beginning of Rick's transformation from noble deputy to flawed leader of this new world. In the comic, Rick is the central character of the story—the gunslinger who is meant to survive. Rick has an incredibly strong ethical code that leads him to defeat those who threaten his ethical principles, leading critic Ivan Young to define his character as a western hero, stating:

Richard Slotkin defines the hero as “the symbolic vessel of the whole culture's collective consciousness.” Implicit, then, in Rick Grimes as cowboy is a mythic image of America trying to identify itself in positive moral terms based on an act (killing) that is defined by most belief systems as immoral (Young)

Rick's leadership is flawed, but he fights to maintain his moral code that his previous occupation, as deputy, has embedded. He quickly learns that the ethics he was once bound by must be adjusted as a means of survival. He briefly shies away from the leadership position, but soon after, demands it and evokes his authority over others as the decision maker. What is more interesting is who surrounds Rick. The characters who are part of Rick's band of survivors never appear to threaten his white male leadership. It is as if his previous occupation—he literally wears his deputy uniform— maintains his leadership over characters like Glen, the docile Asian, short-lived characters of color (Tyreese), emotionally damaged characters (Morgan), and female characters who are complacent in traditional womanhood roles. The only man who threatens Rick's role is murdered because, as Simpson explains,

Killing Shane represents Rick's justified vanquishing of the last real internal threat to his leadership – an act of self-defense, yes, but a reclamation of the power that the stronger, more decisive Shane had usurped from Rick (including the sexual possession of Rick's wife) since the beginning of the apocalypse (Simpson).

This means the only counter to Rick's leadership was another white male, who also was a deputy, signifying that default leadership is white heteronormative men that must oversee the *others*.

Ownership of property and life becomes a critical theme in *The Walking Dead* as safety, shelter, and supplies are limited yet, essential to survival. Jason Walker explains the predicament between ownership and morality within the comic as, "Although they scavenge from abandoned properties for food and other goods, they never prey upon other survivors for their property, even where it may be expedient" (Walker). Though Rick, compared to others, embodies a greater moral compass, it cannot be ignored that he, too, has preyed upon others. For example, when Rick's group of survivors' stumble upon a prison already inhabited by inmates, the group, headed by Rick, take over and eventually play judge and jury in the murders of the prisoners. Canavan describes that, despite the prisoners already having residency in the prison, Rick makes the decision to take possession in the hopes of creating a safe community for his family and the other survivors (443), which links Rick's behavior to colonial past, as Kirkman pushes the narrative of a white male taking over others land, similar to colonizers and slave owners. Canavan continues describing Rick's colonial behavior in the prison and brings attention to a problematic trope at play, "and as soon as the two black prisoners acquire guns a

shootout ensues in which one is killed and the other is run off—which in the context of these other examples suggest the old age trope that women cannot be safe around unknown men, particularly black men” (443). Rick begins deciding who lives and dies after he arrives to the Prison, creating the rule “You kill? You die. It’s as simple as that” (“Safety Behind Bars”). Rick’s philosophy changes as he realizes the danger in humanity and begins to kill first under the pretense that he is protecting his family. Thus, Rick’s killing (of zombies and other humans) is for the greater good, implying that even when his tactics are amoral, they are necessary. Clearly, Rick is exhibiting white privilege and continuing to keep dominance in favor of the western hero’s trope.

Kirkman uses Rick’s character to question the labels of good versus evil by allowing him to vacillate between hero and villain status; therefore, any damaging or unethical actions are forgiven. In contrast, characters of color who counter Rick’s white privilege fall victim to contentious problematic characterizations. For instance, King Ezekiel, though a leader, does so as a performance. He speaks in a British accent and performs his leadership role as a Shakespearian play, which implies he must take on the role of a heteronormative white male to maintain a position of power. While interesting to see a black man share his passion of the arts, it also displays colonial impact on black leadership. Once again, the comic is creating another non-threatening black character that will not complicate Rick’s dominance.

So, while Rick remains at the center of the story, the subject of numerous scholarly articles and essays, there are several other survivors who have acquired attention and examination as well. For example, Glenn’s racial identity and masculinity is analyzed in “The Model Minority in the Zombie Apocalypse: Asian- American

Manhood on AMC's *The Walking Dead*' by Helen K. Ho, and there are handfuls of essays examining *The Walking Dead* through a Marxist² or feminist³ lens. However, there are limited (though growing) number of scholars who read the comic with an in-depth lens of intersectionality of race and gender together. This project will examine the representation of Michonne, a prominent black female character in the comic who undergoes problematic characterization, some similar to other black characters describe earlier. The once lawyer, fencer, and mother, is now a katana-wielding zombie slayer and involuntary *superwoman* of Rick's band of survivors. Michonne's transformation calls into Kirkman's problematic characterization and questions Rick's code of ethics, particularly in terms of how she is racialized in the narrative.

Michonne's character, unlike many of the secondary white women who reside in the main group of survivors, is layered and complex, and a detailed examination, as well as a historical reading of black womanhood is required to explore Michonne's *otherness* and her otherwise problematic storyline. Early on in the comic, Michonne displays her strength by countering female stereotypes and is clearly in juxtaposition with the other white female characters who are presented as damsels in distress. Michonne's complexity, as Kirkman writes her character, emerges from her being a black woman, and the only black female character (so far) given substantial characterization. Despite the fact that *The Walking Dead* takes place in Atlanta and surrounding parts of Georgia, there is a severe lack of black characters. Michonne's introduction sets her apart from her white counterparts the moment she is seen wielding her weapon and her dreadlocks flow in the wind on the cover of issue #19, *The Heart's Desire*. Pokornowski describes

² Mckena, Tony. "The Walking Dead: The Archetype of the Zombie in Modern Epoch."

³ Gencarella, Stephen Olbrys. "Thunders without rain: Fascist masculinity in AMC's *The Walking Dead*."

Michonne's silent but strong introduction as, "Michonne, who appears in both the comic and AMC iterations of *The Walking Dead*, eerily echoes colonialism and racism. This tall, cloaked African American woman wielding a sword and leading chained zombies not-so-subtly evokes the slave trade "(Pokornowski). Without explicitly stating, Kirkman is using coded undertones of slavery's past to elicit the feeling that Michonne is *other*, but also yielding power at the same time—a reversal of sorts.

Michonne's first appearance is a show of force displaying both her strength and wit, but it also differentiates Michonne from the other women in the text. Her first encounter with Rick and the survivors shows her singlehandedly saving one of the main survivors from a small herd of zombies. This displays from the start that Michonne is "masculine" and not in need of male protection, unlike the majority of her white female counterparts. Michonne is a purposeful counter to white womanhood, and while it is refreshing to see Kirkman create a black female character that exhibits such strong independence to counter forced traditional womanly roles, it comes at a cost.



Figure 1.

Coded throughout the text are stereotypes of Michonne as the mammy, mule, and jezebel— 19th century tropes that have haunted black women both historically and presently. These stereotypes, together, embody the identity of *superwoman* and *angry black woman* that often complicates the perception of Michonne as a black woman. Critics such as Kinitra Brooks, Rupe Simms, and others discuss these terms and their application to black women in both society and in fiction. These authors analyze the terminology and their creation originating out of slavery and the South to dehumanize, instill fear, inferiority, and control black women, (Brooks, “Race and Gender” 461, 467; Simms 880, 882; Chandler 201). These same stereotypes/tropes that have lived well into the 21st century has also “served to construct and perpetuate the myth that was to become the strong Black woman’s American identity” (Chandler 204). This identity follows Michonne the moment she enters the comic, as she is immediately under what George Yancy calls the “white gaze”, which is the, “daily obstacles of living ... where every action has to be second-guessed for its possible misinterpretation by a hostile or simply uncomprehending onlooker” (X). These tropes and their consequences create an environment of isolation and neglect, and an overall problematic portrayal of Michonne. This project will examine how 19th century stereotypes that are coded in a 21st century text undermines the complexity of Michonne, an otherwise, revolutionary character for the zombie genre.

Horror and Zombie History:

The horror genre has grown drastically from its Gothic origins and have brought to life killer dolls, witches, leprechauns, and spirits with unfinished business. Notorious

monsters from Gothic literature such as Dracula and Frankenstein have enticed viewers for generations, and constantly shift in their metaphorical meaning and physical appearance. Though McIntosh notes that the emergence of most horror figures stems from the Gothic era, the zombie figure, in particular, originated from “non-European tradition and has been passed directly from folk culture into popular culture without first being established in literature” (2). Since then, the zombie figure has been used in the horror genre from movies to comics that, in return, influenced *The Walking Dead*. However, Arnold T. Blumberg in “Four-Color Zombies” states, that “*The Walking Dead* owes more to zombie movies than it does other zombie comics” (Blumberg). Acknowledging that Kirkman’s comic models itself after zombie movies is also understanding that Kirkman is influenced by an already established problematic history of creating caricatured characterizations of people of color.

Zombie movies date back to the 1930s and have a long history of erasure in regards of black characters, despite zombies stemming from slavery, as previously stated by Keetley, “Despite their curious erasure of racial slavery, these first white zombies nonetheless embodied anxieties about loss of autonomy and about one person’s dominion over another” (Keetley), or black characters appear as “odd and primitive” (qtd. Brooks, *Searching for Sycorax* 13). Brooks explains that characterizations such as “savage” or “deadly native” were amplified as the horror genre continued to develop (13), and to combat black erasures in films, the genre Blaxploitation emerged in the 1970s, which provided movie roles to blacks but also magnified their problematic stereotypes. Blaxploitation found its way into comics in the 1970s as well, furthering the stereotypes to be consumed by widespread media and society.

Although Blaxploitation films may not be a direct influence of inspiration for Kirkman, it remains part of the problematic portrayals that are found in *The Walking Dead*. Blaxploitation was not limited to films, it influenced comics as well.

Blaxploitation and comics in the 1970s was interchangeable, as both mediums perpetuated caricatures and problematic examples of black peoples struggles and culture.

Adilifu Nama in *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes* states that “the political and aesthetic interplay between the Black Power movement, black superheroes, and Blaxploitation films” (6), because both comics and movies shared signifiers of anxieties and desires in America (6), therefore creating dangerous examples of black Americans for mass consumption. For example, in the comic *Luke Cage: Hero for Hire* (1972), Luke Cage volunteers to be a test subject after being wrongfully incarcerated. This experiment leaves him with super-strength and impervious to bullets.⁴

Another cultural issue that arose is noted by Annessa Ann Babic in her Introduction to *Comics as History*, in which she discusses how in comics, readers “see that the nonwhite characters associated most with other nonwhite actors, much as individuals did in their own lives and communities. Hence, comics literature illustration diasporas of culture without actually addressing social concerns and misconceptions” (5).

Blaxploitation storylines began appearing in the 1970s, and though creating a character that was supposed to empower blacks, it also pushed forward the idea of aggressive black men and women that some media outlets protested against. Benshoff highlights how economic class divided Blaxploitation films reception, stating “the middle-class black

⁴ Black Hero Comics of the 1970s. <https://blogs.harvard.edu/houghton/2015/04/10/black-hero-comics-of-the-1970s/>. Accessed 15 March 2017.

press often became quite hostile, arguing that the films were potentially damaging to the black psyche and/or to the struggle for equal rights" (33). The era of Blaxploitation, instead of empowering black women, furthered the stereotypes of *superwomen* and *strong black woman* as Benshoff states, "There was little chance that the black superwomen would empower most black women of the early 1970's" (41). Blaxploitation films also perpetuated black woman as overly sexual, "Female monsters were more regularly deemed truly monstrous because of their wanton sexuality (Abby) or were contained within patriarchal parameters through plot and cinematographic objectification" (Benshoff 41). Though portrayed as vehicles of liberations, the films only furthered the portrayal of masculine yet sexual women, who remain trapped under the patriarchy. While Kirkman may not be directly pulling inspiration from these comics or Blaxploitation films directly, the tropes/stereotypes used in *The Walking Dead* appear to align with each other; which exhibits how historical misrepresentations that media perpetuates crosses multiple mediums and influences how black characters are presented or even erased.

Michonne vs. Traditional Womanhood:

The Walking Dead contains a variety of storylines that complicate gender and the relationships between men and women and even amongst the women themselves. There is a clear division of labor where the women are tending to the laundry and children, while the men hunt and fend off zombies. The women in the comic come off as passive to male leadership, especially Lori who finds comfort in womanly duties like doing laundry. However, there are moments when the women assert themselves against the male dominance surrounding them only to be countered with aggressive language and the

threat of violence. For example, Lori approaches Herschel, owner of a farm the survivors inhabited, for wanting to throw herself and the other survivors off his farm. They debate passionately back and forth before Herschel raises his hand in aggression towards Lori stating, "You've run your mouth enough, woman!" ("Miles Behind Us"). This scene displays that Lori, a female, was out of line and needed to be put back in her place, when Herschel decides to assert his power as a white male, exhibiting power dynamics between men and women, on top of white male dominance. It cannot be ignored that *The Walking Dead* is suggesting that the zombie apocalypse is creating a reset to gender norms and the progress of female empowerment.

Women have a long history of both unreachable expectations and limitations in trying to fulfill the false ideal of womanhood. The concept of the quintessential wife that tended to the home is passive and pristine has been a mold that women continually have to combat. However, black women, due to race and class, has not always received the benefits nor included in the liberations of society's idealism of womanhood. In 1960s through the 1970s, there was a second wave of feminism where women fought for equality in society and the workplace (Baxandall and Gordon 414), but black women felt excluded from the movement, as it appeared "for a long time as a movement of middle-class white women" (Roth 46). So, as long as there has been a fight for women's equality, there has also been a fight for inclusion. Benita Roth touches upon the complicated history of inclusion of both gender and race in *Second Wave Black Feminism in the African Diaspora*, where she states "they [black women] challenged white feminist movements for ignoring economic and survival issues to the Black community, and for failing to examine personal racism" (49). The lack of inclusion stems from society's

perception of black women historically as either too masculine, their bodies designed for labor, or even genderless as Angela Davis states in *Women, Race, and Class*:

The slave system defined Black people as chattel. Since women, no less than men, were viewed as profitable labor-units, they might as well have been genderless as far as the slaveholders were concerned.... The slave woman was first a full-time worker for her owner, and only incidentally a wife, mother and homemaker.

Judged by the evolving nineteenth-century ideology of femininity, which emphasized women's roles as nurturing mothers and gentle companions and

housekeepers for their husbands, Black women were practically anomalies (5).

Thus, historical black women have always been set up to be a stark contrast to their white counterparts whether at work or objects of desire. This purposeful design places black women as outsiders that lack the privilege of protection and are dehumanized. This very perception and lack of inclusion follows Michonne and her narrative in *The Walking Dead*.

When Michonne first enters the comic, readers are introduced to her physicality, as shown in figure 1, rather than her character. Michonne's clothing, for instance, from her cloak, gloves and katana presents her as *other* in comparison to the other female characters. Her face remains hidden under her cloak as she walks as one among the undead. She only reveals herself to fight off a herd of zombies when assisting a member of Rick's group, she is seen effortlessly using her katana to decapitate walkers. Shortly after, she meets Rick and her cloak is back covering her face, so that even the readers see a faceless zombie slayer. Panels later she decapitates her two pet walkers and agree to forfeit her katana in exchange for being allowed to sleep in a locked jail cell. Her entry

into their community comes after proving her value by assisting with the herd, and she is even put to work before she even enters the Prison, as Rick states in the last panel “All right then, hand over the sword and whatever else you got, and come on in. You can help us with the burning” (“The Heart’s Desire”). Her introduction presents Michonne *otherness* through both her gender and race within moments, therefore, in consequence, establishing her as the *superwomen/strong black woman* (Brooks, “Race and Gender” 469).



Figure 2.

Michonne’s introduction into the comic is deliberate in establishing her as *superwoman*, which creates division between herself and the other survivors. She is isolated, not only at night when she is locked inside her jail cell, but emotionally she is

treated differently by being monitored. Michonne's past life is hidden from readers, unlike the other characters whose stories are upfront or their humanity instantly displayed, compared to Michonne whose humanity is slowly revealed and earned. It becomes clear that her characterization was a purposeful design to keep her isolated and distant from the other survivors emotionally. She is instantly racially profiled, and her privileges must be earned as she is monitored by Rick and the others. As stated above, Michonne is forced to have her prison cell locked at night, her katana is stripped from her because "even this powerful woman is rendered repeatedly powerless throughout the season, with her phallic katana often being seized from her by men" (Simpson). Another example of this occurs when Rick states to Tyreese how she must remain under a watchful eye in her debut issue in the "The Heart's Desire." "Good. That woman's got to be tough as nails to last as long as she did alone out there. Saved Otis' ass, too. Damn. We need to keep an eye on her" ("The Heart's Desire"). Rick's words do not reveal that Michonne is perceived as a threat due to her race, but his words do exert his male dominance and exhibits his male fragility. And while race is not mentioned directly, it should be noted that blackness is a visible part of Michonne's physicality, and as the only black female it is not a coincidence that she is not afforded the same protection that Rick provides her white counterparts.

As one of the few dominant women in the comic, Michonne is quick to take-charge and speak her mind. She is a go-getter who has proven her abilities to survive on her own in the wild west of zombie-land while also exhibiting an unwillingness to be complacent with performing traditional womanly duties to pacify men. Though she eventually finds others to confide in, she is ultimately presented as *other*, and unable to find sisterhood compared to her white counterparts who, prior to her arrival, have bonded

over laundry and other domestic chores. For example, this early scene in the comic particularly highlights how gender roles in *The Walking Dead* have reverted from progressive to archaic given their current primitive setting. In its inaugural issue, *Days Gone By*, a scene features several female characters washing clothes while the men either lounge around or perform the role of hunter has drawn a great deal of attention by bloggers and critics alike. Over the course of a couple of panels it is quickly revealed what are considered women's roles versus men's in a zombie apocalypse:



Figure 3.

This scene exhibits the expected gender performances from the women of the comic. Judith Butler, in her most notable work *Gender Trouble*, tackles gender performativity when she argues that the characteristics bound by gender identity are performances that individuals present to stay in-line with social norms, stating “we are

compelled in our bodies and our minds to correspond, feature by feature, with the idea of nature that has been established for us.... 'men' and 'women' are political categories, and not natural facts" (qtd. Butler 147). *The Walking Dead* continuously depicts various gender roles in various multifaceted ways, but ultimately only allows a limited amount of characters to break gender norms, and usually in complicated and problematic ways. The women, while tending to the laundry, discuss their current obligations. Donna, an opinionated stocky woman, states "if women will be even allowed to vote after," while Lori (Rick's wife) replies this "isn't about women's rights," "it's about being realistic and doing what needs to be done." These comments show both ends of the spectrum in regards to female positions within the group. Butler's claim, "that gender reality is created through sustained social performances..." (Butler 215), resonates in this scene, we clearly see forced gender roles and performances, instead playing to individual strengths. However, not every scholar who has approached this scene views it as a performance of traditional gender roles.

Ashley Barkman, for example, insists that Donna's statement is "uncalled for, childish in its exaggeration" (Barkman) and that Lori understands the value of the menial task of laundry. Barkman even concludes her chapter with, "men and women are not only different, they are not equals, and being equals is not the be-all and end-all of life" and "Political correctness shouldn't rear its haughty head in life-or-death situations" (Barkman). While Barkman makes valid points, she ignores how belittling women becomes a vital part of the comic. For instance, Andrea is a sharpshooter but forced to babysit and has to consistently nag Rick to be on the front line to help battle the walkers.

Yet, Michonne, who too is female, is by default right next to the men slashing walkers, which reinforces her “masculinity” and mule tropes.

The invisible line that allows Michonne to fight next to the men yet, allows the other white female characters protection carries into other elements of division in the comic. Michonne is allowed to work for them, but remains untrusted and misunderstood by the other women. Examining the relationship between Michonne and the women, it becomes clear the tropes being used to create divisiveness. Kirkman uses Michonne by playing into the *angry black woman* trope and creating clear lines of division between the black loner and the white housewives. Lori, who is the dutiful wife to Rick, keeps Michonne at a distance. This becomes problematic because Lori is able to speak reasonably with everyone else but Michonne. Lori even manages to find empathy and compassion with Carol, who suggests a polyamorous relationship between herself, Lori and Rick. Yet, Lori is unable to hold a proper conversation with Michonne over lunch at the Prison, as she stumbles over words and is unable to find common ground. It becomes clear that Lori has already made up her mind to dislike Michonne when her son Carl, questions why Lori bothered to invite Michonne to sit with them when she has stated prior her dislike towards Michonne.



Figure 4.

A couple panels over, Lori awkwardly discusses her current trivial morning routine in which Michonne replies “cute” (“The Heart’s Desire”). Lori brings up the topic of children, but soon becomes even more uncomfortable. Michonne observes Lori’s discomfort and begins to guide the conversation as Lori continues to stumble over her words. Lori’s approach to Michonne is awkward and uneasy as she believes that her and Michonne could not have common interest. Exhibiting again that Michonne is approached and perceived differently based off of race and her refusal to comply to traditional gender norms. It is not until Michonne shares with Lori, that she, too, was a mother, ex-wife, girlfriend, and a sister that Lori is finally able to see Michonne’s humanity. While the other women find purpose tending to their families and staying busy with womanly task, Michonne understands that to survive there can no longer be the traditional gender performance. She understands that dependency on men can result in death, and while clean laundry may make you feel human, it will not save your life. But her survival instincts cause her humanity and femininity to come into question because,

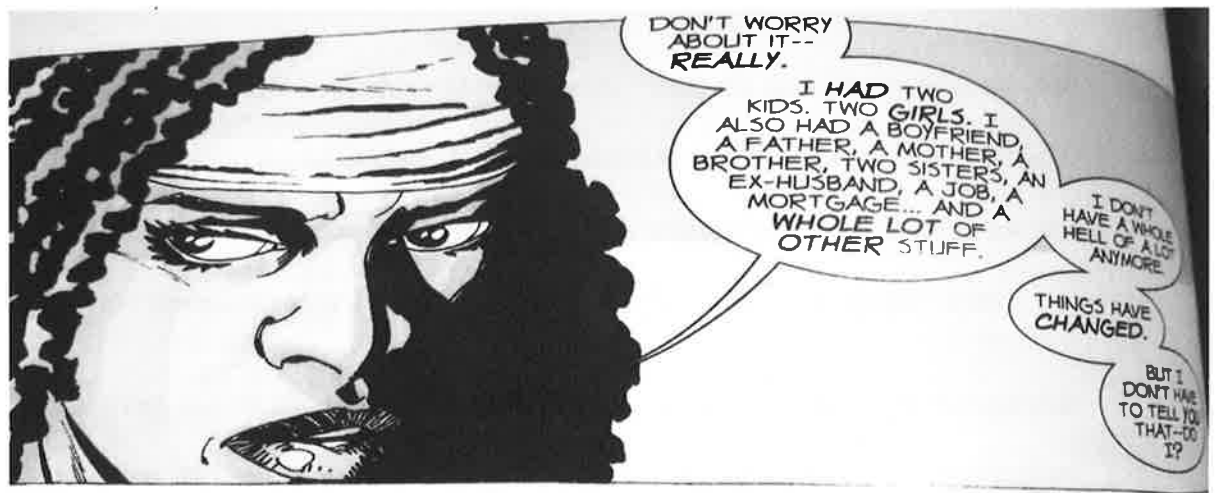


Figure 5.

unlike the other women she does not carry the nurturing trait or passivity on her sleeve. It is revealed as the series progresses that her emotional aloofness is due to loss of family and other traumatic events,

“Michonne is differentiated in her introduction to the readers. She no longer defines herself as mother: “I had two kids. Two girls. I also had a boyfriend, a mother, a brother, two sisters, an ex-husband, a job, a mortgage, and a whole lot of other stuff. I don’t have a whole hell of a lot anymore. Things have changed” (Brooks, “Race and Gender” 469).

Yet, because of this “differentiation” Michonne is perceived to be masculine. The term masculine is language that is typically used to favor men and to criticize women for not fitting into the mold of womanhood created by society. This term has been used consistently towards black women as an insult, but it stems from a complicated history. Brooks notes Calvin Hernton when discussing black women’s historical issues with the term masculine:

Calvin Hernton notes that this masculinity, “from the days of slavery even until now, has produced in many Negro females a sort of ‘studism’ which expressed itself in a strong matriarchal drive . . . black women are too demanding, too strict, too inconsiderate and too ‘masculine’” (Brooks, “Race and Gender” 464).

Thus, slavery and its aftereffects have forced black woman to embody the strength that has traditionally been favored for men yet, fault them for surviving their circumstances. The same can be said for Michonne’s character. She survived on her own and is equipped with a set of skills that counters the norm for women. Therefore, Kirkman’s

representation is more masculine, which in-return blurs gender lines enabling the other characters to continually dismiss her emotionally.

This stereotype means Michonne is never given the space to share her story or process her emotions, unlike the other characters whose “horrific losses are similar to those recounted and experienced by so many other characters in the comic, but none has carried this terrible burden with the quiet endurance of Michonne, the embodiment of the strong black woman” (Brooks, “Race and Gender” 469). Instead, Kirkman limits her portrayal to stoic *superwoman*, which connects to the historical concept that black women are unstoppable mules. When one thinks of superwoman in popular culture there is usually a cape and superpowers involved. However, this term has been given new meaning as it has become a taxing characterization that presents black women to be both disposable and lacking humanity.

Michonne and Andrea are the most comparable in regard to strong female characters in the comic. They both perform traits that would be considered masculine but are treated differently in regards of their femininity. Andrea is the best shooter in the group but is required to teach Tyreese. In a moment of life and death Andrea would be the ideal shot, but because of gender, Tyreese, a terrible shooter, would be in charge of someone’s fate.⁵ Therefore, this is when duties such as laundry become sexism, tactics of control and possession by allowing the men to have something to safeguard. However, unlike the women discussing their inequality, similar to the women during the second wave feminism, Michonne is not granted this protection of tending to safe womanly

⁵ Though referencing the show, Simpson states, “The show so far has consistently raised the possibility of female empowerment only to decisively shut it down” (Simpson).

duties. Her role as protector is expected due to her role as mule (just as black women were expected to work alongside men in the plantation fields), unlike Andrea, who is first protected, and then slowly allowed into the role of protector. Thus, Michonne breaks many of these gender norms and instead of being rewarded she is ostracized and exploited.

Instead of bonding over their shared complexities and oppression of trying to break gender norms, Michonne and Andrea do not connect. When Andrea attempts to hold a conversation with her, she notices Michonne talking to herself, which provides readers their first impression of Michonne having a possible mental health disorder. Such a revelation should encourage a sympathetic development of her character, yet Kirkman depicts their interaction as hostile. Michonne snaps back, clearly defensive for being caught in a vulnerable moment and Andrea mumbles “bitch” as she walks away. This exchange shows that Michonne lacks ability to converse with members of the group and emphasizes the lack of female connection and understanding with Michonne and the other women.

Michonne the Jezebel:

Michonne inherently understands her stigma among Rick’s group and therefore gravitates towards Tyrese, one of the few black characters in the comic. Tyrese is romantically involved with Carol, a young blond-haired mother when Michonne enters the comic. Michonne disregards Carol’s feelings, and seduces Tyrese from Carol with “guy talk” and performing fellatio.



Figure 6.

This moment is where Michonne chooses to align herself with someone of the same racial identity, rather than cultivate the female relationships around her. Michonne recognizes her position as an outsider and uses her power of sexual manipulation to allure Tyreese away from Carol, in an attempt to achieve not only a supportive element, but to exert her own sense of power and to ultimately feel human again. But, in doing so, she became the very thing that historically white women were made to fear, putting Michonne in a complicated situation of exhibiting sexual freedom and becoming the jezebel. Brooks describes the term jezebel and its historical past as “the sexually voracious black girl/woman who seduces the white male slave master/overseer” (“Race and Gender 468). Simms digs deeper with the term in by detailing how history formed this caricature by stating black women were described as “sex-starved woman, who was childishly promiscuous and consumed by lustful passions... The Jezebel image

concretized Black female subordination, justifying the rape of African women by white men" (883). Consequently, Kirkman uses historical tropes to make Michonne the villain by playing into the stereotypical seductress, adding another stereotype to her characterization of masculine and *superwoman*. Thus, her behavior creates a paradox when she uses her femininity to become a seductress, but is not feminine enough to be protected because, as Brooks claims, "Her blackness is implicitly associated with a certain masculinity, which actively separates her from the rote ideas of femininity associated with the ideals of white womanhood: demure, domestic, delicate, and in constant need of male protection" ("Race and Gender" 470). Michonne the complex zombie slayer is trope by trope being stripped of her humanity and exploited by her blackness.

Michonne's Assault:

Michonne challenges gender norms and leadership that typically comes with traditional white male characterization within the comic. She is able to fight amongst the men, but it comes with constant reminders and limitations of being a black woman forcing her way into a white male space. This use of assertiveness by Michonne, as already discussed, is met with resistance by Rick, and the other female characters, but is also similar to Philip who goes by the name "the Governor." Philip is the first main undead antagonist Rick and the fellow survivors encounter. He rules over a community called Woodbury, where he keeps zombie heads in fish tanks in his bedroom along with his zombie daughter, who is locked away in a closet. It becomes transparent when Rick, Glen, and Michonne encounter Philip that Michonne's presence unnerves him. Philip quickly reminds Michonne that she is both female and black, and therefore should stay in

her place. When Michonne tries to answer a question Philip responds with, "Believe I was talking to the man here, ma'am. I hope you understand" ("The Best Defense"). This is attempt at silencing her by borrowing archaic rules of speaking to only the men. Pages later, he snaps at Michonne, "Kindly, shut the fuck up sister" (The Best Defense). The term "sister" is not only a clear reference to her race, but also Philip's attempt to mimic what Geneva Smitherman calls "Black English" in *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America*, where she discusses the dialect in the community of black Americans and how it is used as a tool of oppression against the community. Their exchange intensifies as Rick refuses to tell Philip the location of the Prison. In an attempt to force Rick to reveal the location, Rick's arm is chopped off and Michonne defends Rick by biting Philip's ear off, which escalates to Michonne being chained to a wall, repeatedly beat and raped as an act of vengeance and to exert power over her.

Michonne's rape is one the most disturbing storylines and visuals to date as the comic dramatizes the long history of violence against black women. This scene displays a trauma "that has elicited much criticism from antiracist readers and bloggers, who say the rape is depicted in a graphic, even sexualized way" (Steiger). The comic fully displays Michonne's body hopelessly chained and sprawled to a wall. Her vagina and buttocks are barely covered by the use of purposeful shadows and the placement of Phillip's goons who chain her up as she waits to be sexually tormented. The artistic use of angles is equally demoralizing and provokes emotions of both powerlessness (Michonne) and power (Philip). As Philips peers over Michonne, the illustrators use visual elements that evoke and "display misogyny and racism" (Pokornowski).

continues to complicate society's idea of masculinity and female subjugation as it reiterates rape as a tool for revenge and power, and it reads even more problematically in *The Walking Dead*. That the only black female character is the one carrying this racially-filled plot device, unlike other characters like Lori, Rick's dutiful wife, and Andrea, who is the closest to parallel Michonne's strength, show how the protection of white femininity is upheld at the expense of a black woman.

Considering slave history in Kirkman's representation is not out of context. Kay Steiger states rape by a white man "reflects a time of terror" (102). She connects this act to the time period when "slave owners" and "sympathizers" (103) used rape as a form of power, making this plot development in *The Walking Dead* troubling because it reinforces a past reality. Furthermore, it is clear that Phillip is using rape as tool of power and revenge both for Michonne's assertiveness and her blackness. The rape goes on for several pages, a recurring scene that cements Kirkman's use of Michonne as a plot device. As Brooks states:

Michonne allows Kirkman to horrify his readers without alienating them—something that could not have occurred with any of Kirkman's other female characters. Kirkman lazily relies on the creative myth of the strong black woman to show that Michonne is "a machine" for whom sympathy and complexity need not exist ("This Sorrowful Life") (Brooks, "Race and Gender" 471).

The decision to use Michonne for the rape-revenge plot was strategic and purposeful — a way to thrust history's past on the comic's most radical, revolutionary character.

Michonne from the beginning of the storyline is assertive, sexual, stoic, yet vociferous when needed. Thus, Phillip attacking the only black woman who dared to have a

powerful presence is viewed as an attempt for Michonne to be “put in her place” (Garland, Phillips, and Vollum 20). It has been made clear that Michonne does not fall into the traditional womanly roles and therefore “Michonne is raped to emphasize her femininity and later placed in a gladiator ring replete with zombies, highlighting her masculinity as a fighter” (Brooks, “Race and Gender” 471). Michonne’s duality—both feminine and masculine—showcases the intersectionality of her character. First, she is sexually assaulted and, then, forced to fight in the Woodbury’s festivities, in which the town gathers to watch humans battle zombies for sport. And these center-stage events place Michonne in a paradoxical situation of being punished for her race and gender; she is strong/masculine enough to fight and weak/female enough to rape. What could have been a character to dramatically shift the zombie genre to create a positive, black female hero figure is then reduced to tropes and stereotypes for the sake of a plot device. As Brooks makes clear, “Kirkman hints at the existence of multiple facets of her character yet chooses to sacrifice her empowerment to the demands of the narrative” (“Race and Gender” 471).

The Aftermath:

Kirkman fulfills the representations of the *superwomen* trope by silencing Michonne’s mental and physical pain after surviving the brutal assault. Rick and Glen escape Woodbury, but not before Michonne enacts her vengeance on Phillip, which fulfills her use for Kirkman’s rape-revenge plot (Brooks, “Race and Gender” 470). While guiding Rick, Glen, and two other members of Woodbury back to the Prison, Rick takes notice of Michonne’s behavior and tells Glen to keep an eye on her, as she is untiring in her quest leading the group back to the Prison. Their new female companion

even notices Michonne's behavior, as she states; "If we can keep up. Woman's been walking all night and she's still going? She's a machine, must be does she ever stop?" ("This Sorrowful Life"). Though she is referencing Michonne's determination to get out of the openness and back to their community, the word machine should not go unnoticed as it reveals how she deals with her struggles and how she is treated by others. Brooks writes, "for [t]he construction of strength [among black women] allows both onlookers and a woman herself to de-empathize her struggle, to disconnect from any assistance, and to turn a blind eye to real oppression in the context she is facing" (qtd. "Race and Gender" 469), which applies to how Kirkman allows Michonne's pain to be detached from herself and the fellow survivors.

And though Rick does ask Michonne about her well-being during their escape back to the Prison, her rape is almost never mentioned. The only notable acknowledgment is Michonne talking to herself, questioning if she took her revenge against Phillip too far. This is the second scene exhibiting Michonne's mental state, but more notable because it showcases how the comic expects her to simply carry on. The most atrocious act of violence, thus far, is treated nonchalantly in its aftermath. The idea that Michonne enacts violence towards her attacker stands for her justice being served belittles her character. She is now expected to simply continue on without any explicit emotional distress only reinforces the *superwoman* trope and diminishes her trauma. She is, yet again, another black character who suffers in silence, reinforcing the belief "that the strong black woman presents a "problematic discourse" where "strength is likened to a performance and a facade rather than an honest reflection of Black women," which "privileges self-silencing and self-negation" (qtd. Brooks "Race and Gender" 467).



Figure 8.

Michonne rarely complains or shares her pain. She is very specific with who she lets her guard down with. This attitude does multiple things at once. Firstly, it reinforces the stereotype of *strong black woman*. Second, it exhibits how Michonne is very aware of her hierarchy or lack thereof. Thus, what appears as uncivilized behavior under the “white gaze” is, instead, Michonne securing her survival from not just the walkers, but those around her. Nonetheless, Michonne and her pain are viewed as two separate entities that stem from the problematic stereotypes that blacks can handle trauma at a higher rate than others. And that mainstream viewers find their suffering to be viewed as more palatable than their white counterparts further the dehumanization of the black body. So ultimately, Michonne’s stigma did not stay in Woodbury, but continued on with Rick and the survivors well after, as the stereotypes continue to follow her. Thus, due to her blackness, Michonne is expected to internalize her emotions and carry the weight of her experiences silently. Kirkman provides Michonne with enough strength to continue to work but fails in providing her the emotional freedom to explore or express herself as

compared to the other women. Though forced into traditional roles, Michonne's white counterparts still have a sense of vulnerability that she is not entitled to.

The Return of the Jezebel:

As the embodiment of the 19th-century mammy and mule tropes, Michonne is a survivor. Her assault did not stop her sexual desires, neither did Tyreese's death, who was decapitated by Phillip before the surviving members of the group were forced to flee the prison. Throughout the comic, she becomes romantically/sexually partnered with multiple black male characters, including Morgan, King Ezekiel, and Heath, who she attempts to seduce. It is as if Kirkman purposely limits Michonne by keeping her in her place by limiting her romantic pairings to men who look like her, implying her desirability is bound by her blackness and she must stay within her own ethnicity to receive any romantic or sexual attention. It is also worth noting that with all three men Michonne is unable to completely let her guard down, as she is shown to be difficult with each of the men, which only furthers these stereotypes. This trend becomes even more troublesome when considering how these tropes' historical context are placed solely on the only prominent black female character in the comic.⁶ Kirkman rarely allows Michonne's rough exterior to crumble, and she expresses the weight of this burden to Morgan on his deathbed.

⁶ The only other notable black female character is Brianna, whose main purpose is to play spiritual negro to Maggie, by encouraging her to lead Hilltop. Later she is the designated babysitter (mammy) to Maggie's son.

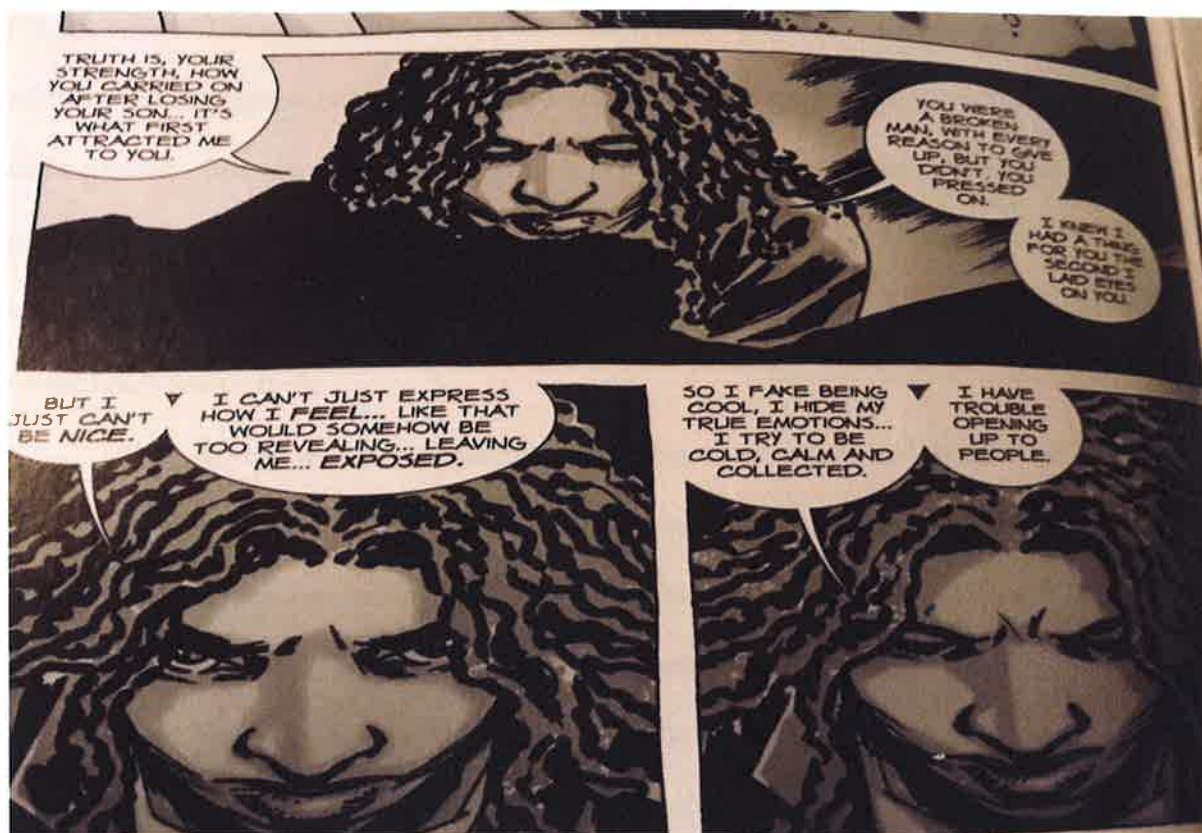


Figure 9.

As the above panel sequence shows, Michonne expresses the need to remain “cold, calm, and collected.” Her fear of overexposure are the very issues and weight the trope *superwoman* forces on her character. But this scene adds a human element to Michonne’s character, which highlights that she registers her surroundings and perhaps feels emotionally unsafe to let her guard down. Michonne is carrying the weight of her identity and it becomes debatable whether Kirkman highlights this to increase her character’s likability or to simply advance the narrative.

As the story progresses, new and old stereotypes are insinuated further. For example, the jezebel trope continues when Michonne attempts to seduce Heath, who is dating Denise, a white woman. He declines her offer, but not before telling her that

Maggie warned him about Michonne's prior seduction of Tyreese. This exchange reveals Michonne as the wanton black woman in the group who seduces black men from their white partners. This representation is alarming in numerous ways. It reinforces the threat of black women sexually to white women and implies the inability for Michonne to control herself. Simms describes this behavior and the damaging consequences it places on the black female body:

African women was that of Jezebel, that is, the sex-starved woman, who was childishly promiscuous and consumed by lustful passions. Her sexual aggression, fertility, and libidinous self-expression were considered limitless. The Jezebel image concretized Black female subordination, justifying the rape of African women by white men (882).

It would be irresponsible to not align Michonne's attempts at seducing men who are romantically involved with white women, her assault, and the continuation of her problematic characterization as ramifications of the former. As a result of her actions, she is abused, remains isolated among the group, and is only of sexual/romantic value to black men. These realities trap Michonne in an even further contradiction of being both the Jezebel and Mammy.

The original mammy figure does not fit into the visual image provided to us of Michonne. She is not robust or wears a scarf around her head, instead the mammy figure has been preserved and adapted to fit the aesthetics of *The Walking Dead*. Simms defines the mammy as:

One that portrays the Black woman as obedient to whites in general, faithful to the master and his family in particular, and happy in her subordination. As an

always-on-call, dull-headed, live-in domestic, she cooks, irons, hews wood, carries water, nurses the sick, sweeps the floor, delivers babies, and is unselfishly willing to care for the white children ahead of her own. She is asexual. Therefore, she poses neither threat to the mistress nor temptation to the master and although they indulge her becoming fussy at times and intruding into household affairs, she never forgets "her place." Because the mammy is so skillful in the ways of white culture, her owners believe- paternalistically- that she is civilized through her interaction with them. They also consider that because of their influence, she has become more socially acceptable than field hands who have relatively little contact with whites (882).

Simms states the mammy figure is "asexual," and while it is clearly demonstrated that Michonne is not, what is demonstrated through subtle subtext is that she is portrayed as asexual in regard to anyone outside of her race. Any and all romantic attention, thus far, has come from those of shared racial identity. She is only paired or even flirts with black men and is never pursued or considered a threat to the women whose men are not black, "she is asexual. Therefore, she poses neither threat to the mistress nor temptation to the master" (Simms 882). The only exception, obviously, is when Philip rapes her. Thus, she becomes the jezebel figure yet remains unwanted.

Michonne continues to fill the role of the mammy and, due to her perceived masculinity, she is also thrust into the role of mule. After her assault and the force retreat from the prison, Michonne is on the front lines protecting Rick and the survivors. She finally finds a community to belong to, after earning her keep and their trust and extending herself for their protection, even if it means bodily harm. The fact that this is

only achieved after her rape suggests she pays the ultimate price for her acceptance.

Simm's claim that "[the mammy's] owners believe paternalistically that she is civilized through her interaction with them. They also consider that because of their influence, she has become more socially acceptable" (882) fits well here. Like the mammy figure, she is eventually accepted and trusted as she has earned her worth and has assimilated into the group, but only after Rick, leader/owner, dictates her acceptance to the group.

Michonne's affiliation with them allows her a twisted sort of civilization, but she remains *other* despite her new sense of belonging.

Even Barkman takes notice of Michonne unwavering dedication to her new community, "In the Alexandria Safe-Zone, she is assigned duties of maintaining order equal to that of Rick. And she is shown to go out of her way to protect Rick, out of deep respect" (Barkman). Barkman views Michonne's loyalty as honorable, the same way she viewed or simplifies the aftermath of Michonne's rape as perseverance. However, Barkman is again, taking the comic at face value. Michonne is being pushed further into other stereotypes, because now, her blackness and ability to absorb pain and persevere is based on her becoming the mule of the group. Similar to the mammy figure, Michonne becomes civilized through her assimilation with her white family (the survivors), and like the mammy and mule, Michonne must work for her value.

Despite clear racial and gender divisions from both the men and women of Rick's group, Michonne still desires and finally earns her membership. She becomes a valued member through her survival and combat skills. She still remains distant, but she begins to express her emotions and grievance with Rick and Andrea, who becomes the new matriarch of the group following Lori's death and later forges a romantic relationship

with Rick. There are two significant scenes where Michonne makes it clear she feels emotionally and physically tired and used. The first occurs as the group travels trying to find a sanctuary after their abrupt departure from the prison. When they run into a herd of zombies, Andrea cries out, “Will someone come over here and stab this thing?!, ... “I want a sword.” The very next panel over has Michonne beheading a zombie with her face hidden by harsh shadows compared to the previous panel, which uses a white background to frame Andrea. Michonne replies, “Andrea kill this, Andrea kill that. Stay here and protect these people, Andrea, Andrea, come with us for protection. It would get old quick, trust me.” This is a rare moment where Michonne complains and exposes her feelings. Though nothing comes of this scene, it does add an additional layer to her character, even if it only reinforces the trope of mule and mammy because as Simms claims, “although they indulge her becoming a bit fussy at times and intruding into household affairs, she never forgets “her place” (882). And her place is having her katana in hand when called upon and to be silent otherwise.



Figure 10.

The second moment occurs when Rick comes to talk with her in their new refuge—a town called Alexandria. He explains he does not want to continue fighting with their latest nemesis Negan. On the one hand, Kirkman uses this scene to build

Michonne's relationship with Rick. She explains she is okay with not continuing the war, stating "Sometimes I feel like I'm on a leash," then repeating the same words she spoke to Andrea numerous issues earlier, "Kill that for me" and finally she blatantly states, "I could use a break" ("Fear the Hunters"). On the other hand, her words clearly reveal her humanity; she is exhausted by all that she has done and is expected of her.



Figure 11.

Slowly, we see the layers of Michonne shine through despite the tropes and stereotypes that surround her. Rick's and Michonne's relationship both complicates the narrative of her being only the mammy/mule, but also reinforces it. Rick, even with his best intentions, views Michonne as someone who can take the abuse, be it physical or mental, and continue on. His treatment may not be as calculated or filled with evil intent, but he, too, has bought into the perception of the black woman being the stereotype of the jezebel, mule, and mammy that embodies and enforces the idea of Michonne being their very own *superwoman*.

Michonne's character, despite her complexity, cannot undo the stereotypes that

preceded before her from centuries ago. She becomes engulfed in problematic 19th century stereotypes in a 21st century narrative. She is forced to endure being a black female in a white patriarchy that places privilege on the female body based on racial identity. Her blackness leaves her unprotected both physically and emotionally. Consequently, her aloofness comes off as cold rather than a tool of survival or as someone who has lost everything dear to her, similar to those around her. But due to her blackness, her feelings appear detached to both herself and the fellow survivors, ultimately showing how her aloofness, which has assisted in securing her survival, keeps her isolated and neglected.

The moment Michonne is introduced in the comic she is differentiated. Her entry with two shackled walkers and a katana magnified her blackness and masculinity, making her a threat to Rick's white heteronormative leadership and an interloper with the other female characters. However, despite problematic tropes and stereotypes attempting to misrepresent Michonne's character, she still reads triumphantly. As Kirkman draws upon outdated and overused stereotypes to portray her character, Michonne still reads as an empowering black female character for the zombie/horror genre. She achieves this status by fending off assaults by both the living and the dead. Despite the troubling characterization, isolation, misrepresentation, rape, and her own personal flaws, Michonne remains a revolutionary character—one that will add significantly to understanding more fully other representations of black female characters in the comic world.

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