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## Freeing the Black Final Girl in Postmillennial Zombie Horror: Race, Gender, and the Strong Black Woman Stereotype in 28 Days Later, The Walking Dead, & Z Nation

Makhalath Fahiyim  
makhalath.fahiyim@bobcats.gcsu.edu

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Freeing the Black Final Girl in Postmillennial Zombie Horror: Race, Gender, and the Strong  
Black Woman Stereotype in *28 Days Later*, *The Walking Dead*, & *Z Nation*

Makhalath Fahiyim

M.A. Candidate

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## Introduction

In the now cult-classic British indie film *28 Days Later* (2002), the character of Selena is the sole black woman, and her uncommon presence in its post-apocalyptic landscape is startling and unusual. Watching *28 Days Later* for the very first time as a teenager, I remember the surprise and excitement I felt when Selena, played by black British actress Naomie Harris, appeared on the screen. Already inured to the absence of black women in film, her presence felt like a thrilling anomaly. My initial excitement was almost immediately met with apprehension as I cautioned myself not to get too invested in her character because *28 Days Later* was a horror movie. My distrust was not unfounded. Horror, as a genre, was often not too kind to its black female characters. It was a genre well-known for its trope of black death, for punishing its black characters who, to borrow a term from writer Niela Orr, “knew too much” and who dared to ask questions (87). Characters who perhaps had the foresight and intelligence to run away from danger still somehow managed to meet a gory end despite their intuition and resourcefulness. I knew that this trope increased the likelihood that Selena, as the film’s only black female character, could die within the first fifteen minutes. Or, even if she was not the first to die, as was the rule for black characters in horror cinema regardless of gender, the odds of her surviving to the end of the film were slim. As a black female spectator and avid horror movie fan, I had internalized this facet of the politics of black representation in film and popular culture. By and large, the mainstream horror genre has neglected black female characters. When black female characters are represented at all, I thoroughly expect an abject and fatalistic trajectory for them. I assumed that Selena’s narrative resolution would come to a typical and disappointing end. The ubiquity of this felt like more than just an overused trope. It seemed inevitable. As much as I desired to see more black women represented in horror films, that visibility and presence often came with its own set of problems and common stereotypical

depictions—it almost seemed better if black women were not included at all. When a black woman was represented, my learned instinct was to be suspicious. Surely, at some point in *28 Days Later* the moment would come where Selena would die a horrible or needless death while sacrificing herself for the sake of the white main character(s). There are no black Final Girls.

Contrary to this well-established pattern of erasure, death, and abjection for black female characters in horror, Selena did not die in the first fifteen minutes or by the end of the film. Selena was, in fact, a Final Girl. Selena stood out to me not just because she was the rare black woman in a post-apocalyptic zombie film, but because she was black and the Last Woman Standing.<sup>1</sup> Her uniqueness as a black Final Girl falls within the scope of Carol Clover's original theory of the Final Girl in her influential essay "Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film," which defines the Final Girl as the sole female character who survives against all odds, unlike the other male and female characters. Unlike the traditional gendered damsel in distress, the Final Girl exhibits the "masculine" qualities of intelligence, resourcefulness, and perseverance that are typically ascribed to the male phallic hero, which allow her to triumph over terrifying and traumatic experiences (35). Selena and how she can be interpreted as a black Final Girl also goes beyond the limitations of Clover's original concept, which emphasizes white normativity. The original Final Girl concept is predicated on how white femininity has traditionally been defined as fragile, demure, and in need of protection. Black femininity has historically been defined against white femininity. In particular, black femininity has, unlike white femininity, been portrayed preternaturally strong. By incorporating black feminist theories of intersectionality, subjectivity, and looking relations into an examination of race, gender, and the Final Girl, deepen the Final Girl concept and its

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<sup>1</sup>Selena is the only adult woman in the story. Hannah (Meagan Burns) is the only adolescent girl.

application to BIPOC female characters. Selena is the ultimate black Final Girl because she survives and triumphs on both terms of her blackness and her femaleness. She also reveals the mixture of strength and vulnerability that are key aspects of how black femininity is depicted. Her representation as a black woman in post-apocalyptic horror counters the invisibility and erasure of black women in speculative genres, where there never seems to be a black woman in the future. It also shatters the cycle of the Dark Other, a theory correlative to horror's trope of black death and abjection, which asserts that the black characters, or the Dark Other, are a problem that must be resolved with violence, and which disallows the Dark Other from experiencing a narrative fulfillment (Thomas 6). Not only does Selena remain alive, but she is also pivotal to the story. I began to allow myself to be hopeful and my hesitancy to become attached to her character dissipated. The ending of *28 Days Later* lingered with me long after I watched it and I know that its impact is because of Selena's survival. It was the first time that I could remember being able to experience and fully participate in the narrative payoff of being the Final Girl, an experience that is often denied black female spectators. But it also begs the question of why there were, and perhaps still are, so few black Final Girls? Even with the post-civil rights increase of BIPOC representation and inclusion and the era of multiculturalism of the nineties, why is it that, in an early 21<sup>st</sup>-century horror film like *28 Days Later*, a black Final Girl is a rare occurrence? According to Diane Adesola Mafe in her book titled *Where No Black Woman Has Gone Before*, "white female characters and (less frequently) black male characters continue to find more empowered lead roles" in horror but "black female characters rarely do" (141). Since the eighties, there have been a plethora of iconic contemporary horror movies with white Final Girls or strong female heroines who fight monsters and the bad guys, like Jamie Lee Curtis as Laurie Strode in *Halloween* (1978), Sigourney Weaver as Ripley in *Alien* (1979),

and Jodie Foster as Clarice Starling in *Silence of the Lambs* (1991). Concurrently, black male representation saw growth and expansion in horror as well, extending from classic horror films like *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) to *The Thing* (1982) and *The People Under the Stairs* (1991). Horror films, as the *Therapy for Black Girls* podcast episode “How Horror Films Help Us Process Life,” discusses, are meant to offer the viewer the opportunity to make sense of what can be imagined and survived (Bradford). But if black female characters, who fall in the interstices of race and gender identities, are not even featured, what does the black female spectator get to imagine and survive?

The diegetic scarcity of black women in horror mirrors the non-diegetic invisibility of black women in the real world. Both inform and reinforce the other creating a film imaginary and social reality loop where, to quote the title of Gloria T. Hull’s pioneering volume of black feminist research on issues of racial bias, sexism, and homophobia, “all the women are white, and all the blacks are men.” Because black women frequently occupy a space of alterity that is obscured by both race and gender, the rare instances where, like Selena in *28 Days Later*, a black woman is a present and central figure in horror, or other speculative works, are significant and worthy of examination. Since the release of *28 Days Later*, other notable examples of black Final Girls in postmillennial zombie horror include Michonne (Danai Gurira) in the popular AMC television series *The Walking Dead* and Lt. Roberta Warren (Kellita Smith) in the SYFY television series *Z Nation*. A gritty neo-Western zombie drama, *The Walking Dead* explores moral ambiguity in a kill-or-be-killed world and *Z Nation* has a distinctive humorous and entertaining style and questions the humanity of the sentient zombie. All three bring to the forefront the black Final Girl through their central black female characters. Selena, Michonne, and Roberta serve as unusual and significant examples of black

female characters who imagine and survive in situations where typically they are not present, are not in leading roles, or are pigeon-holed into one-dimensional tropes and stereotypes.

I chose to examine Selena, Michonne, and Roberta because they provide an effective cross-section of black female representation in post-millennial, post-apocalyptic zombie horror in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century. Starting with *28 Days Later* in the early 2000s and ending with Michonne's 2021 exit in season 10 of *The Walking Dead*,<sup>2</sup> I consider these two decades as bridging the gap between the shifting trends in the representation of 20th-century contemporary horror and the current post-*Get Out* "golden-age of black horror" (Means-Coleman 9). This renaissance in black horror has seen a greater representation of black female characters by black creators and with a focus on black culture. The space that Selena, Michonne, and Roberta occupy is significant because horror film and television has "lagged behind other genres in its ability to do or show anything fresh regarding black subjectivities...despite the fact that speculative material can often take the most poetic license" (Mafe 140). I suggest that Selena, Michonne, and Roberta are an early part of this burgeoning shift in representation, although they are black female characters created by white male authors. Their characterizations are unique in how they challenge racialized horror tropes of death and abjection, approach a level of subjectivity, and complicate the marginalization of the black femme in horror.

Specifically, post-apocalyptic zombie horror films and television include all three elements of the speculative genres: fear, fantasy, and the future. This merging of speculative elements makes zombie horror a uniquely generative subgenre for examination of what society is afraid of, what it desires, and what it can imagine in ways other genres of horror are not.

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<sup>2</sup> Season 10 of *The Walking Dead* premiered October 2019 and concluded April 2021. Michonne exits the show in Episode 13, "What We Become." The show's final season 11 is set to end this year.

Because zombie horror typically involves an apocalyptic event that creates a dystopian future, and it usually does so in a setting that is strikingly contemporary and parallels current reality and contemporary societal issues. It creates a borderland or gray area that combines the speculative element of the “future” commonly associated with science fiction, the monstrous aspect distinctive to the horror genre, and the normative elements of quasi-realism. Zombies have served as metaphors for otherness that threaten white normativity and are linked to racial anxieties surrounding miscegenation and black retribution, as well as xenophobic fears about immigration and the changing face of Western societies from the earliest feature-length zombie film (Guerrero 56-57).<sup>3</sup> The subtext of zombie horror has always been racial anxieties and the metaphoric substitution of the monstrous Other with the racial Other. Black female representation as the non-monstrous Other, yet Dark Other in zombie horror heightens the presence of alterity and the opportunity for interactions that emphasize difference.

In analyzing these characters in popular film and television, I posit that post-apocalyptic zombie horror is an important site of possibility to deconstruct the virulence of controlling images of black femininity, particularly, the Strong Black Woman (SBW) stereotype. Drawing on Kara Keeling’s theory of the black femme as a figure whose image and representation has the power to subvert cinema’s reinforcement of hegemonic structures and present alternative possibilities, I insist that Selena, Michonne, and Roberta are transgressive characters who push against parameters of normativity, gender binaries, and racialized sexual politics prescribed to the black femme. While the urgency of day-to-day survival is emphasized in the apocalyptic zombie setting and precludes the need for a certain degree of toughness, it

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<sup>3</sup> For more detailed examination of the alien or supernatural Other as racial allegory in 20<sup>th</sup> century horror see Ed Guerrero’s “Slaves, Monsters, and Others: Racial Fragment, Metaphor, and Allegory on the Commercial Screen,” in *Framing Blackness*.

also heightens the opportunity for black female characters to be written and depicted in ways that reinforce the SBW stereotype. Concurrently, it also provides an opportunity for more nuanced portrayals where black female characters can be both strong and vulnerable. Black female characters like Selena, Michonne, and Roberta in *28 Days Later*, *The Walking Dead*, and *Z Nation*, compel viewers to rethink the cultural constructions of racism and sexism that breed misogynoir and reimagine black female subjectivities.

In my examination of Selena, Michonne, and Roberta, I seek to gauge the extent to which they succeed as subjects and in what aspects their characterizations fall short. While I am paying specific attention to the misogynoir present in controlling images of black womanhood that play a role in how characters like Selena, Michonne, and Roberta are understood, the purpose of my analysis is not to parse these examples of the black femme in postmillennial zombie horror into “good” or “bad” depictions, but to critically engage with the politics of representation and the contextualities within race and gender. It is directly predicated on the reality that race, sex, class, sexuality, and experience “make a profound difference in how the female subject is constituted visually and how those images circulate” (Wallace 483). Selena, Michonne, and Roberta’s characterizations as black female characters in horror who are breaking cycles of death and abjection, have something specific to reveal about horror cinema and how viewers think about race and gender.

The three black female characters that I am examining are all written by white male creators. My interpretation of Selena, Michonne, and Roberta is conscious of their authorship and the significance of the postmillennial time period that is directly influenced by a white Western societal anxiety over diminishing power and the threat of racial dissolution. As postmillennial horror exists as a bridge between the underrepresentation within earlier decades

of late 20th-century horror and the current post-*Get Out* horror films being produced in what has been termed as a golden age and renaissance of black creation of and representation in horror, *28 Days Later*, *The Walking Dead*, and *Z Nation* provide a cross-section of film and television that is at the helm of a shift in representation and visibility. I am cognizant of the specificity of authorial intent and how that influences the construction of the black femme in popular culture. However, I also suggest that authorship has only so much influence on the construction of the black femme in popular culture because misogynoir is not limited to white mainstream media. Overall, Selena, Michonne, and Roberta are modern black Final Girls in horror who achieve greater subjectivity, and, in doing so, disrupt black women's present-absence in horror film, stereotypical representations of black womanhood within the white Western imaginary, viewer's expectations, and the power constructs of racism, sexism, and classism within their respective narratives.

In the next chapters, I will articulate the theoretical context, scholarly background, and interlocutors that make up the foundation of my critical examination of Selena, Michonne, and Roberta as complicated black femmes in postmillennial zombie horror. I will also briefly outline the historical and sociocultural context of issues of black female representations in film and in horror specifically. My interpretation of these characters is grounded in a critical race, counter-storytelling approach that values my subjective experience as a black female spectator. An intersectional lens is also necessary to examine black female representation in 21st-century horror films and fill in the gaps where traditional feminist theory, horror theory, and black cinema studies fall short. I am using a black feminist oppositional gaze to read against stereotypes, and to analyze and explore the intersectional applicability of Clover's theory of the Final Girl to Selena, Michonne, and Roberta as black Final Girls. I assert, as have other film

and horror scholars like Robin Means-Coleman and Kinitra Brooks, that the black femme automatically tests the limitations of Clover's theory because black female sexuality and womanhood have, since the colonial past, been phallicized and stigmatized as masculine in the Western cultural imaginary. Thus, the black Final Girl is complicated by the controlling image of the SBW.

I will then introduce my case studies, in chronological order of their release, starting with Chapter 1 "The Last Shall Be First: Freeing the Black Final Girl in *28 Days Later*," then Chapter 2 "Apocalyptic Love: Romancing the Black Final Girl in *The Walking Dead*," and bookended by Chapter 3 "Lay Her Burden Down: (Un)Laboring the Black Final Girl in *Z-Nation*," In Chapter 1, I will focus on how Selena is the first black Final Girl in a post-apocalyptic zombie film. I will look at the extent to which she succeeds as a black Final Girl, balancing both strength and vulnerability. I will illustrate how her sense of self-preservation informs her subjectivity and challenges the cycle of the Dark Other. In Chapter 2, I will look at the significance of Michonne's visibility as a black femme in one of the most popular and wide-reaching series in cable television history. I will analyze how her black femininity disrupts the objectification of white womanhood, normative ideals of the patriarchal white family, and the romanticizing of nation-building. In Chapter 3, I will look critically at how Roberta stretches the limits of the black Final Girl. I will argue that her complication of the Final Girl and the SBW controlling image is the most complex and unconventional. I will explore how Roberta subverts the notion of the SBW's self-imposed expectation to endure.

Lastly, I will discuss how these case studies are relevant to a larger discussion of the sociality of misogynoir and the potential speculative genres like horror have to decolonize the imagination and push the boundaries of what is possible to imagine and survive. Drawing on

Michele Wallace's question of how images of black women in film and visual culture influence and are influenced by cultural constructs (265), I attempt to discern what Selena, Michonne, and Roberta reveal about the Western cultural imaginary, and how they indicate a criterion for an emancipated black Final Girl.

### **Disrespected, Unprotected, and Neglected: Misogynoir & Issues of Representation**

Like the marginalization of black female representation in horror, the critical exploration of black femme in horror is under-represented. Film studies and cultural analysis of blacks in horror have tended to focus on black masculinity and the black male perspective, while feminist analyses have tended to focus on white women. Important scholarship in film studies that centers on the black female representation in horror includes Kinitra Brooks, Diana Adesola Mafe, and Robin Means-Coleman. I will draw upon these scholars to support my interpretations of Selena, Michonne, and Roberta as nuanced and more fully realized black Final Girls who push the boundaries of black female representation in zombie horror by their complication of the SBW stereotype, their emotional complexity, and their obfuscation or transcendence of fatalistic denouement. Each character participates in the creation of what their future looks like and voices alternative possibilities to the present and past.

Delineating how culture and cinematic images inform perception of the self and how others perceive a group is uniquely both a subjective and objective process. Meaning that the spectator must engage with the cultural perception and cinematic images from a personal and an abstract perspective. Important to the exploration of black female representation is an understanding of the schemas that are associated with black womanhood and how black womanhood is defined, viewed, and consumed within the Western imaginary. That a horror trope like "the black character always dies" or the tendency to view black women as innately

strong, and different from other women in ways that seemed to exclude her from simply being a woman. Such representations of black womanhood have a long historical precedent and distinct social purpose of marginalization. In her collection of essays *Black Looks*, hooks describes a process, called the “oppositional gaze,” wherein the viewer, particularly the black female spectator, can critically look back at images that represent the self with an awareness of the hegemonic notions of otherness it places onto black female characters. A gaze which looks back and resists the racist and sexist conventions contained and disseminated within film and visual culture. Instead of internalizing images on the basis of entertainment or without question, the oppositional gaze requires the viewer to renegotiate the terms of viewing. It allows one to view black female characters like Selena, Michonne, and Roberta and see where they are liberatory in their survival and the elements of their portrayals that are interesting and nuanced. It also allows one to acknowledge where they are reductive. It is a useful frame to engage with black female representation in film, television, and visual media and demands more complex and nuanced characterizations. I use the oppositional gaze to examine the specific intersections of being black and female, identify the unique politics of representation that accompany the black femme in visual culture, to describe the misogynoir or gendered racism that black women experience and how that specific violence of erasure and exclusion operates within the white Western imaginary.

The recurrence of the image of the SBW stereotype is not a mere coincidence, it is a conscious pattern that speaks to how society believes black women should be and exist. The SBW stereotype, and its representation in film, has the power to influence black women in everyday life from the workplace to dating life. Wallace controversially critiqued the image of black womanhood as “superwomen” or the myth of the strong black woman. Bailey defines

misogynoir as describing “the uniquely co-constitutive racialized and sexist violence that befalls Black women as a result of their simultaneous and interlocking oppression at the intersection of racial and gender marginalization” (Bailey 1), Misogynoir is at the root of the specific racialized horror trope of death and abjection that befall black female characters. The intentionality of the use of the trope and the SBW stereotype are social thermometers to the underlying attitudes surrounding race and gender in Western society. Horror cinema is the perfect vehicle to communicate racial anxieties and figurations.

The oppositional gaze is an important tool in applying gender theory to horror and black female representation in film. It is crucial to understanding that the image of the black femme is defined and redefined against the objectification of white womanhood. I am interested in the oppositional gaze as a reflexive critical lens “where cinematic visual delight is the pleasure of interrogation” (hooks 126). As a mechanism of interrogation, it constructs a dialogue that resists, as Wallace has termed it, “patterns of exclusion” (225). Instead, it pays specific attention to black female subjectivities and acknowledges the black female spectators’ disidentification with “phallogentric gaze” and the construction of white womanhood as lack” (126). Wallace defines this in more detail, as she describes how American culture has constructed a binary between white womanhood and black womanhood Wallace states that the “status of the white female “image,” or the objectification of the white female body, is part of the circuit of subjectivity for women” (483). In other words, this objectification of the white female body exists within a dichotomous construction that also serves to pedestalize white womanhood in relation to the black female body and black womanhood. This is central to contextualizing black female representation in horror.

Images that resist conventional black female representation have plenty of social influence and play a significant role in what the black female spectator, as well as others, can imagine and survive. Western film, as a tool of hegemony, has a vested interest in the creation of controlling images that delineate, encode, and perpetuate the marginalization of black women on a global scale. As defined by the black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins, controlling images are stereotypes that “are designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life” (69). Controlling images are firmly entrenched in the Western cultural imaginary and subsequently are reproduced and marketed in the cultural industries of film and visual culture. As Howard University professor and filmmaker Steven Torriano Berry Notes in the foreword to *Horror Noire: A History of Black Horror*, Robin Means-Coleman’s foundational work on the history of blacks in American horror films, “motion pictures are a powerful tool for manipulating facts, information, and images that often affect people’s perceptions, beliefs, and mental attitudes toward the subject presented” (Coleman pxii). Horror employs certain “symbolic figurations of blackness” (Morrison ix) that exist within the white Western cultural imaginary that strongly associates blackness with monstrosity (Guerrero 52). As Collins states, these controlling images of the Sapphire, Mammy, and Jezebel have not remained “static” (148) and have evolved from the antebellum period and morphed into different iterations in the present, including the SBW stereotype.

The SBW or “superwoman” is one of the most pervasive controlling images of the black femme. Michele Wallace describes the SBW, or what she coined as the myth of the black superwoman:

It is of a woman of inordinate strength, with an ability for tolerating an unusual amount of misery and heavy, distasteful work. This woman does not have the

same fears, weaknesses, and insecurities as other women, but believes herself to be and is, in fact, stronger emotionally than most men. Less of a woman in that she is less “feminine” and helpless, she is really *more* of a woman in that she is the embodiment of Mother Earth, the quintessential mother with infinite sexual, life-giving, and nurturing reserves. In other words, she is a superwoman...Even now I can hear my reader thinking, *Of course she is stronger. Look what she's been through. She would have to be. Of course she's not like other women.* (Wallace 107)

The SBW possesses an undue strength in the face of pain, abuse, and trauma yet continues to endure where normally no one else would be expected to. The SBW becomes insidiously applicable to black female characterizations in horror texts, and zombie texts. Too often, the supposed inordinate strength of black women becomes the starting point for all characterizations of black women...” (Brooks 32). hooks states in *Aint' I A Woman*, “The stereotypical image of the black woman as strong and powerful so dominates the consciousness of most Americans that even if a black woman is clearly conforming to sexist notions of femininity and passivity she may be characterized as tough, domineering, and strong” (hooks 83). The SBW is the opposite of the damsel in distress trope which the (white) Final Girl is meant to be defined against. Selena, Michonne, and Roberta, as black Final Girls in postmillennial zombie horror, both conform to and challenge the SBW stereotype, and do so in ways that encourage the viewer to rethink internalizations of controlling images and the sociality of misogynoir.

### **Politics of Possibility**

The black femme function can be generative within horror at producing compelling portrayals. In what Kara Keeling calls the *black femme function* Black women, when present in a film, often activate, and challenge certain patterns of race, gender, and class, posing a unique dilemma for films. In general, contemporary post-millennial zombie films have exciting potential for more nuanced and fully realized representations of the black femme than in

previous decades. Disabilities scholar Sami Schalk writes about the potential of speculative fiction to be restorative for marginalized people:

Speculative fiction allows us to imagine otherwise, to envision an alternative worlds or future in which what exists now has changed or disappeared and what does not exist now, like the ability to live on the moon or interact with gods, is suddenly real. For marginalized people, this can mean imagining a future or an alternative space in which relations between currently empowered and disempowered groups are altered or improved. Speculative fiction can also be a space to imagine the worst, to think about what could be if current inequalities and injustices are allowed to continue. (Schalk 30)

They present a representational politics of possibility and the opportunity to imagine a cinematic “radical Elsewhere” (Keeling 1) within the setting of an alternative reality where normative structures have collapsed. As mentioned previously, these settings are familiar and parallel to the present, like in *28 Days Later* and *The Walking Dead*, yet set in the future while simultaneously concerned with confronting the past and building a new world. Because the black femme in horror is often a subversive presence that functions to disrupt constructions of race and gender, the association of the black femme in Western zombie horror with the SBW controlling image suggests an investment in black women’s physical, affective, and creative labor. As Clover puts it, horror “tells on” mainstream media (229). If this is true, and, “horror has something to say about religion, science, foreigners, sexualities, power and control, class, gender roles, sources of evil, an ideal society, democracy, etc.” (Means-Coleman xix), then it certainly articulates a set of ideas about the black femme in the Western imaginary and definitions of black femininity that are couched in misogynoir.

Furthermore, if black womanhood poses such an ontological threat what does that mean in a world that is falling apart? With the colonial history and racial metaphor that is at the root of post-apocalyptic zombie horror, it is a “powerful mode with which to engage ideas about how the past, present, and future can be reconciled and shaped” (Schalk 30). *28 Days Later*,

*The Walking Dead* and *Z Nation* all focus on the process of building or rebuilding society to some degree and therefore are deeply engaged in the meaningfulness of reimagining values, ideals, and structures. Their engagement with the idea of nation and the meaningfulness of human principles, values, and social structures further emphasize the politics of possibility. In the landscape of post-apocalyptic, social destruction creates conditions that offer hope for better worlds in its wake. An empowered representation of black women in such a space, in any space, but especially in the fictive potentiality of cinema is revolutionary.

### **The Black Femme and Black Final Girl in Zombie Horror**

The problematic representation of black women in zombie horror can be traced back to the genre's inception and the second zombie film ever made, *Ouanga* (1936). Starring Fredi Washington as Clelie Gordon, *Ouanga* told the story of a scorned black female Haitian plantation owner who plots her revenge against her former white lover after he chooses to be with a white woman over her. She uses voodoo to conjure two black zombies to capture the man's fiancée for a sacrificial voodoo ceremony. The plot goes awry, and she is killed by one of her black servants. The 1974 film, *Sugar Hill*, offered a similar revenge narrative that ends in death. A Black female protagonist named Sugar (Marki Bey), with the help of her black zombie army, lays waste to a murderous White crime boss and his cronies (Means Coleman 9). Both movies align with the pattern of death and abjection of the black female character. In the case of Sugar, her death is figurative. Motivated by her desire for vengeance, she sells her soul to the Lord of the Dead, Baron Samedi, in order to raise up a zombie army on her behalf. Characters like Clelie and Sugar set the stage for later black female representation in zombie horror, and horror as a whole, as one that is typified by themes of the phallic heroine, or the Final Girl, as outlined by feminist film scholar Carol Clover.

Clover's seminal work *Men, Women, and Chainsaws* introduced the theory of the Final Girl. The Final Girl of the 80s slasher movies was notably white and middle-class, a very specific iteration of white femininity. Contemporary "psychoanalytical feminist theories posit that "woman" outside patriarchal discourses and binaries remains difficult to imagine. That difficulty is exacerbated in the case of black womanhood" (Mafe 119) because race and intersectional identity disrupt the Final Girl concept. Clover's Final Girl has been critiqued on the topic of race and expanded upon by black film scholars and black feminist scholars alike. Kinitra Brooks notes that Clover's Final girl has a set of characteristics that "relies upon the normativity of whiteness" (20). Robin Means-Coleman discusses the construction of the black Final Girl in horror, initially established as the "Enduring Woman" of 70s Blaxploitation films, noting that black women in horror are required to be "much more than 'final.' She differs from the white Final Girl in certain ways. She is seductive, whereas the white Final Girl is sexually unavailable. Black Final Girls tend to fight more realistic forms of oppression, while white Final Girls fight the supernatural or monstrous. And, most significantly, black Final Girls continue to endure an unending fight where they never really win, whereas white Final Girls experience a return to normality" (Means-Coleman 170-171). The onus to endure, where the black Final Girl never truly prevails against whatever it is that seeks to do her harm, feeds into the SBW stereotype. The perceived superhuman strength and resiliency of the SBW does not allow her to rest. In real-life the SBW stereotype encourages black women to stoically endure external burdens of racism, sexism, and classism. In film, this translates to subtle forms of narrative punishment and frustration. The black Final Girl may break the trope of death, but abjection may still be re-inscribed by her inability to completely overcome her traumatic experiences

The Final Girl figure has evolved beyond the original Final Girl of the slasher horror subgenre theorized by Clover horror to encompass strong female characters across genres. Most of these can be loosely connected under the umbrella of thrillers. There is the Final Girl of the horror thriller, the action-thriller, and the drama-thriller. Genre crossover between the horror-thriller and the action-thriller has also encouraged intertextuality in the development of the Final Girl. The development of strong female characters of the horror thriller and action thriller. For example, the 80s slasher films brought about white heroines in horror and action films which were influenced, if not overtly credited,<sup>4</sup> by the precedents set by black women and other women of color. The early model for the white Final Girl and action heroine were the strong female characters played by black and Asian women in the B-level Blaxploitation and kung fu films of the 1970s.<sup>5</sup> According to Jeffrey Brown, women of color in these movies “established many of the narrative and character conventions of the modern action heroine” (78). A notable example is Pam Grier:

That Grier’s characters were often sole survivors is significant in terms of feminist film history and theory. These narrative endings are noteworthy because they suggest evidence of a precursor to Carol Clover’s notion of the Final Girl. In a seminal study of slasher films as a subgenre, Clover defined the Final Girl in terms of horror film. There are parallels between the aggressive action heroines of exploitation and the Final Girls of horror pictures. Like the Final Girl, who looks for the killer, the exploitation heroine looks to satisfy her revenge against monstrous male villains. Much like the Final Girl of horror films, the exploitation heroine is—by the conclusion—aligned with the camera and audience. Like the Final Girl, the exploitation heroine is presented as tomboyish, or “butch,” or somewhat androgynous (i.e., Jamie Lee Curtis in *Halloween*). And, like the Final Girl, who shares masculine qualities with the killer, the exploitation heroine shares masculine qualities with the sadistic villains and prison guards. Grier was a phallic symbol par excellence. (Mask 85)

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<sup>4</sup> Mia Mask argues that Clover obliquely credits Blaxploitation movies and their heroines, citing Clover’s statement that the “low-budget, often harsh and awkward but sometimes deeply energetic films that preceded them by a decade or more— films that said it all, and in flatter terms, and on a shoestring.” (qtd in Mask 91)

<sup>5</sup> Brown also cites Latina women in Westerns as also contributing to this to a lesser extent (78)

Despite this, the Final Girl and action heroine have been perceived as white by default, and, in mainstream film and television, have been played by overwhelmingly white actresses. This suggests an awareness of how strength is racialized and perceived differently on black female bodies and white female bodies. According to Brown, similar to male Blaxploitation heroes, the Blaxploitation heroines were “cool, tough, and sexual...operated on the mean inner-city streets” and “presented a version of angry, ass-kicking women that was unlike anything ever seen before in American film” (84). He goes on to say that “in a circular and mutually reinforcing logic, black women could be depicted as tough and sexual because they are stereotyped that way, and they are stereotyped that way, in part, because they are depicted as tough and sexual in these films (86). When played by white actresses, the phallic heroine became legitimized in a way that the black actress of Blaxploitation films could not achieve.

The black femme in zombie horror in the postmillennial era is a sneak peak to more fully realized and unconventional representations of the black women in horror who are breaking free from historical controlling images and stereotypes that have marginalized and restricted black female representation to a reiteration of the mammy, the jezebel, and the Sapphire. There are specific issues of representation that can be critically examined. Black female characters in zombie horror are engaging in specific subversions of the SBW stereotyped as evinced in the black Final Girl. Through the politics of possibility that are inherent in post-apocalyptic zombie horror as a multifaceted and speculative type of horror. The black Final Girl is breaking cycles of erasure, exclusion, and abjection. Characters like Selena, Michonne, and Roberta are indicating that there are alternatives to punishment, sacrifice, and dissolution.

As established, when not absent from the screen or text, black women have historically and traditionally been depicted in film in accordance with stereotypes that fit certain prescribed racial and gender codes. But when black female representation engages in the black femme function and pushed against the boundaries of racism and sexist conventions, images like the black Final Girl are formulated in ways that cause shock or impact the viewer by their difference. Investigating the post-millennial black Final Girl in post-apocalyptic zombie horror through an intersectional approach fills in the gaps where traditional feminist theory, horror theory and black cinema studies fall short. As the next chapters explore, Selena, Michonne, and Roberta give the viewers the opportunity to stretch the limits of their empathetic imaginations and consider what a black female character can imagine and survive, when she does, in fact, survive.

## Chapter 1 The Last Shall Be First: Framing the Black Final Girl in *28 Days Later*

With its eerie mise-en-scene of London in ruin, *28 Days Later* creates a highly effective visual of a decaying empire that strongly alludes to the nation's sordid colonial and imperialistic past and the fear of reparative destruction. Against this backdrop, Selena's presence as a black Final Girl and her enactment of the black femme function disrupts the allure of a "return to normal" or business as usual racism and sexism. Selena expresses both strength and vulnerability, which complicates how she initially appears to conform to the controlling image of a SBW, as a character who is stoic and resilient in the face of traumatic events. According to Brooks, "the masculinity associated with the strong black woman allows Selena to easily embody Clover's paradigm of the final girl" (37). Her survival and the promise of a new future provide a window into the subversive liberatory possibilities of a post-apocalyptic world. The dual endings for the film, and the resistance toward the original ending where Jim dies also reveal the resistance of audiences toward an emancipated black Final Girl, as she appears unable to truly exist without being paired with a white male lead.

Following the absence of black Final Girls in 80s slashers and the token presence of the sacrificial black best friend of 90s B-level horror movies, *28 Days Later* arrives at the helm of postmillennial zombie horror and would be, at the time, one of the only films in the genre where a black woman exists and survives in an apocalyptic world. Director Danny Boyle and screenwriter Alex Garland build upon the tradition of social commentary and the tackling of complex issues within horror, citing George Romero's zombie classic *Night of the Living Dead* as an influence. Boyle and Garland update the zombie and depart from the Romero model, creating within the zombie horror canon the fast-moving zombie (Redfern and Steiger 289). In a movie meant to be more reflective of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and modern societal ills, such as

pandemics, climate change, and genocide, the zombies of *28 Days Later* are not the undead in the traditional sense. They are humans infected with a virus called “Rage.”

Accidentally released by a group of animal rights activists from a medical research facility, the Rage virus causes people to become crazed and extremely violent. The virus quickly spread as the “Infected” ravaged Britain. It is in the aftermath of this breakout, four weeks later (hence the name of the film), that the film’s protagonist Jim (Cillian Murphy), a former bike courier, wakes up from a coma in a deserted hospital. As he wanders through the empty city streets, he meets and is rescued by two survivors, Selena (Naomie Harris) and Mark (Noah Huntley) who explain to him how the world has changed drastically since Jim was last conscious. After taking Jim to his parent’s home and being attacked by a horde of Infected, Jim and Selena take refuge with father and daughter Frank (Brendan Gleeson) and Hannah (Megan Burns). The four decide to journey to Manchester in hopes of finding sanctuary.

### **Not Your Girl Friday: Selena**

Selena’s fierce desire to survive is one of the first things that Jim, and likewise, the viewer, understands about her, and it initially seems to reinforce the image of the cold and unfeeling SBW controlling image. However, looking at Selena’s insistence on self-preservation through the oppositional gaze, her stance also disrupts expectations of subservience. In this regard, her self-preservation is an understandable, even healthy response, to the stress of surviving four traumatic weeks in the aftermath of a zombie pandemic. The immediate concern of anyone surrounded by the constant threat of being attacked by the Infected should be to stay alive. Her insistence on not merely survival, but self–preservation,

is atypical of the self-sacrificial mammy-like behavior that often characterizes the expendable token black female character in horror. Under the context of the oppositional gaze, her survival instincts increase her subjectivity.

However, from Jim's perspective, Selena appears harsh and uncompromising, both of which are characteristic of the SBW controlling image. After Jim, Selena, and Mark narrowly escape from a group of Infected, Selena notices that Mark has been bitten. Despite his pleas, and, it seems, without definitively confirming that he was bitten, Selena kills Mark. She chops at him, a man who presumably has been her fellow companion for the past month, with her machete without hesitation. Her swift action is necessary because within a matter of seconds Mark would have had the chance to turn. Selena eliminates that threat by killing him, and Jim is shocked by her display of violence.

Selena's sensible use and possession of a machete serve as a double articulation. It is a phallic weapon that marks her as a Final Girl and racializes her. As Brooks writes, "Selena's emotional and physical toughness is highlighted by the continuous presence of her machete" which is a "specific tool associated with people of the tropics, people of color, and, in Britain, Africans from the nation's colonized diaspora" (37). With Selena's use of the machete comes specific figurations of blackness that associate Africa with uncivilized and backward displays of violence and brutality. Jim's view of Selena as indiscriminate and ruthless are tied to the machete as a phobic object symbolic of animality. Also, unlike the impersonality of a gun, the

machete requires close contact and deliberate motion.



Despite the circumstances, Selena's actions are viewed as extreme by Jim, and possibly the viewer as well. Selena appears unrepentant as she tells Jim what is at stake in their new brutal reality: "Look, if someone gets infected, you've got between 10 and 20 seconds to kill them. It might be your brother or your sister or your oldest friends. It makes no difference. And just so you know where you stand, if it happens to you, I will do it in a heartbeat." (*28 Days Later*). She asserts that she will also not allow anyone else to jeopardize her life and that she'd "leave them behind if they slowed me down" (*28 Days Later*). Although Selena has just saved his life, he questions her judgment. Jim's naivete juxtaposed against Selena's survivalist mentality further heightens the contrast between them.

As stated previously, this interaction between Selena and Jim early in the film, indicates that she is not willing to sacrifice herself for anyone. Selena's choices challenge Jim's

expectations and his worldview. His unease with her unwillingness to put herself in harm's way parallels the expectation for the SBW to put on her cape and rush to the rescue of others while eschewing her own safety and protection. Selena's actions are never extreme, only pragmatic. Despite her position on self-preservation, she saves Jim's life several times. And, although Jim is more of a liability to her when they first meet, that she saves his life, shows concern for his well-being, and helps him to find out what has happened to his parents indicates that her survival instincts are tempered with compassion and a desire for human connection. It becomes clear that this perception of her as cold and unfeeling is literally just that—a perception.

The intelligence that characterizes the Final Girl is indicated by Selena's wariness.

When Selena, Mark, and Jim make the trip to the home of Jim's parents, she takes charge of the group's safety. Brooks notes the maternalistic dynamic that this creates between Selena and

Jim:

Boyle deliberately constructs the initial relationship between Jim and Selena as similar to that between a mother and child. Selena steadily admonishes him for his curiosity in such a dangerous environment, whether it is for his entering unknown buildings without caution or not taking proper care of himself in their dire circumstances. Jim is an active participant in the maternal nature of their relationship; it is Selena's name he screams for help each time he is in danger. He even comments after she warns him not to go into a building. "It's like going on holiday with my bloody Aunt." (Brooks 37)

This maternalistic dynamic is not the same as the mammy-like non-reciprocal support of the token black female character and is another outgrowth of her resiliency as a Final Girl. As a black Final Girl, her prescience and hypervigilance are even more necessary for her own survival. Where Jim carries an expectation of safety, Selena's month of experience post-breakout saddles her with the burden of experience. Her adaptability presents itself in her awareness of her surroundings and attentiveness to danger. She would not have made it this far

if she were not cautious. Selena's logic and adaptable behavior would be praised in a man but instead serves to masculinize her instead.

Selena's hypervigilance does not remain the defining feature of her character. Although she starts off as unwilling to form deep attachments, as she begins to feel safer, she lets her defenses down. Unlike the Selena described as "completely humorless" (*28 Days Later*), after Selena and Jim band together with Frank and Hannah, Selena becomes more expressive and spontaneous. As her vulnerability creeps in and the audience begins to understand how deeply compassionate Selena is. She begins to soften and she admits to Jim that she "was thinking [she] was wrong..." (*28 Days Later*). It is this scene that further demystifies Selena. What might seem like inherent strength and resilience is much more likely a trauma response. She is self-reliant not by choice but by necessity. It is suggested that Selena's self-reliance is learned from her life before the Infected took over London. Where Jim had a family, his parents, and a sister, Selena appears to have been alone. In an effort to help Jim find closure, Selena, Jim, and Mark trek to Jim's parents' home where he discovers their desiccated bodies prone in bed where they committed suicide. They leave a note for him, a final gesture that makes it apparent that Jim had people who cared about him. It is unclear if Selena's pre-Infected life included a family or if she took care of herself, as she continues to do now. Her worldview is decidedly different from Jim's. Her lack of trust and pessimism toward being rescued by the military is built upon her experience, the opposite of Jim's in every way, which has taught her that she must protect herself because who else would. She does not have any hope or belief in a rescue or a return to normalcy like her white counterparts because she has already, in a sense, existed outside of its normative structures. The nostalgia that the others may feel for the past is not a reference that Selena can cling to.

Selena's initial introduction on screen seems to reinforce the boyish aesthetic sensibilities that Clover ascribes to the typical Final Girl. Her hair is cut short, in a choppy fashion that looks like Selena did it herself. Her clothing is nondescript and functional. There is not anything about how she dresses that distinguishes her from the men. This deemphasizing of conventional markers of femininity through clothing makes Selena's initial appearance androgynous, a common demarcation of the Final Girl. Selena's desexualized appearance can be interpreted as fully characteristic of the conventions of the Final Girl. Even as a black Final Girl, where this deemphasis on femininity can be read as regressive de-sexualization, it also sets the stage for the moment later in the film, when Selena and Hannah are forced into fancy gowns for the benefit of the male gaze, that the symbolism of gender, femininity, and dress become highly significant.

As if they were playing dress-up with dolls, in a twisted parody of domesticity Major West orders his men to put Selena and Hannah in ball gowns as the "ladies" of the house.

With images of Colonel Henry lounging on the steps of the grand estate, the critical context is also of Britain at the height of the colonial era. It is a critique of the class system and patriarchy, understood in relation to slavery and colonialism. The attempted enslavement of Selena and Hannah makes visceral the intersection between slavery and patriarchy, commerce, and the wealth of the landed gentry. Several images from this chapter are an ironic critique of sexual/racial politics from an earlier time of British empire. (Brown 134-135) Brown points out how "the two women sit, in the dark and in their compulsory dresses, awaiting their fate, beneath a stately portrait of the lady" (135) The gowns are representative of the oppressive trappings of femininity and gender roles that the soldiers seek to force upon Selena and Hannah. Major West tells Jim that he "promised them women". It is one that does not see women as fully human, but as objects that are in service of men and to satiate their animalistic urges. Selena and Hannah are forced to get dressed up. Selena is given a slinky red evening gown and Hannah a poofy red ball gown. While the dress itself is meant to ascribe to

Selena a marginalized and subservient status, its color also subtly signifies a more transgressive expression of female sexuality than Hannah's white and underage femininity. Red is a color of experience as opposed to innocence. Given that black female sexuality is typically hypersexualized it is significant that Selena is given this dress as she is already marked and perceived as more sexually available and thus degradable. One of the few times that Selena's race is mentioned, it is by a soldier who says, "I'm going to have the black one," thereby supporting the idea that the soldiers have a perception of Selena that is also directed by misogynoiristic associations of black femininity and hypersexuality. It also suggests that she is less susceptible to pain and more capable of withstanding punishment. Knowing what is to come and seeing little chance for escape, she directs Hannah, not to resist, but to find a way to preemptively minimize the pain. She gives her pills to help Hannah numb herself and dissociate from what is about to happen. Selena and Hannah actively choose to reject the future that Major West insists that they are a part of, as he tells Jim "women mean a future."

Major West and his soldiers mark a clear divide between subjugation and slavery, as represented by colonial symbolism of the house or "Terrible Place," they reside in. On the other side, they place Selena and Hannah who they attempt to rape, and to Jim, who they attempt to kill. Major West and his soldier's violence are of their own choice, not through involuntary transmission. The sad reality is that they do not need to be bitten to act inhumanely. Unlike the soldiers, Jim is offered this choice and opportunity to practice a way of interacting in the more egalitarian, cooperative fashion that Selena, Jim, and Hannah have developed. Selena epitomizes everything about the Otherness of the wrong or other side that the Major derides Jim for choosing. Thus, in choosing to protect Selena and Hannah, Jim rejects the patriarchal hegemonic structures and systems so quickly destroyed by the Infected. He chooses to align

himself with the most vulnerable and reject the hypermasculinity that the soldiers seek to cling to and reinvent. His choice aligns him with the feminine in the sense that the feminine is representative or symbolic of the values the Major rejects.

Near the end of the film, after Jim, shirtless and covered in blood, has killed the soldier holding her captive by pushing his eyes into his skull, she is unsure if Jim has been Infected, yet she hesitates to kill him. In this collaborative ending, Selena is both Final Girl and damsel in distress in an uncommon balance. It is her partnerships that save her, not her self-reliance. The focus on the upheaval is intentional. The filmmakers studied social unrest around the world while making the film and it is influenced, by conflict in Rwanda and Uganda specifically. The filming of *28 Days Later* also took place prior to and during the events of September 11th but would be released post-9/11. Many of the scenes within the film are inspired by photographs that captured real moments of chaos and death. Within this context, the social anxieties that the film is responding to highlight the sense of transformation and recreation that is inherent in the zombie genre. What makes *28 Days Later* so compelling is that the destruction of Empire, brought to its knees by a viral disease, was a contemporary update of the zombie imaginary that directly questioned the goodness of that society.

As a British indie film *28 Days Later* sidesteps some of the conventions imposed on big-budget Hollywood productions, however, the ending does not escape this in the United States release, which reinforces the notion that an ending without a promise of normative structures is not acceptable. The ending is a perfect example of society's lack of vision when it comes to viewing black women outside of its carefully imposed boxes and how this informs film/cinematic reality and vice versa. The original ending, what Boyle called the "real" ending, was rejected during test screenings (Trimble 69), and does not have all three, Selena, Jim, and

Hannah as survivors. In the original ending, Jim dies. This ending is significant because the audience's resistance to this ending suggests a reluctance within society to accept a version of the future where black women survive and have the potential to thrive unencumbered by structures of society that have previously entrapped them, the very structures that lie in shambles within the film.

Jim is given the choice to continue to perpetuate them by Major West who tells him "I want to give you a chance, you can be with us." In giving Jim the opportunity to align with and enforce the old guard and old ideas of white patriarchal society, it indicates the subversive potential of its death and the opportunity to be free of its oppressiveness. This choice is never given to Selena, who does not have any real incentive to return to "normal" or to be a part of the "future" that Major West attempts to force upon her and Hannah. Instead, Selena "survives the Terrible Place and takes revenge against her terrorizer" and as a group, Selena, Jim, and Hannah "undo the patriarch and his house of would-be rapists...establish[ing] a pattern of meaning that disarticulate[s] security and survival from father figures" (Trimble 82).

The audience is left with the question of whether it was all a dream. The original and much more grim ending of *28 Days Later* and the audience's rejection of it suggests society's discomfort with the possibility of an anti-cinematic ending. Perhaps it is because the image of Selena and Hannah walking off into the unknown runs counter to the pattern of a return to normalcy, or at least the semblance of it. The theatrical ending is much more hopeful in the conventional sense where Selena, Jim, and Hannah all survive and are potentially rescued. It is hard for audiences to consider *28 Days Later* and its original ending as believable. Regardless of the ambiguity of the ending, the question of whether it was all actually a dream, does not change the fact that in both endings of *28 Days Later* Selena survives. It leaves just enough

room for the (im)possibilities of Selena's existence and survival in a world where she can refashion her new life.

Selena's triumph as a black Final Girl is that she challenges constructions of the SBW that disallow her from feeling pain and expressing vulnerability. Her strength lies in her knowing and accepting that, although she is capable of surviving on her own and can protect herself, she does not have to be alone. Her resourcefulness, intelligence, and resiliency are realistic, not superhuman. Where the movie leaves off, the television series *The Walking Dead* can be viewed as a narrative continuation, *28 Days Later* American cousin so to speak

## **Chapter 2 Lay Her Burden Down: (Un)Laboring the Black Final Girl in *The Walking Dead***

In many ways, Selena serves as a prototype for Michonne, whose character in *The Walking Dead* is explored extensively in two serialized forms. Unlike the older Romero-esque zombie horror that emphasizes the ironic humanity of zombies, newer zombie horror tends to focus on the psychological drama of survivors. Brooks asserts that this is a crucial difference because “the focus on survivors offers a glimpse into the potential to actively revise societal hierarchies as a matter of survival” (31). In Michonne, the viewer finds a black Final Girl who is fighting inner demons almost as much as she is taking down Walkers. Michonne’s trauma is what makes her most vulnerable and most volatile. *The Walking Dead* also continues where *28 Days Later* leaves off in regards to the interracial dynamics that are present in the relationship between Selena and Jim that is paralleled and given greater attention to between Michonne and Rick. With the opportunity for multidimensionality, Michonne’s character development is more gradual and has a much longer arc with significant build up across eight seasons. Michonne goes from a mysterious brooding outsider to respected and valued leader on par with Rick. Her emotional journey from untrusting and untrusted as she finds connection and empathy are what marks her as nuanced. In addition to her relationship with Rick and her role as Carl and Judith’s adoptive mother, she departs from her comic book counterpart most significantly in the racialized sexual politics that are present in character’s rape-revenge plot, or rather, its elision within the television show.

*The Walking Dead* centers around this human element and creates a setting for the disruption of tradition. Based on the comic books series created by Robert Kirkman and Tony Moore, *The Walking Dead* first aired on Halloween in 2010 on the cable channel AMC to immense popularity and critical acclaim. At the time, it was ground-breaking as a fresh and

exciting post-apocalyptic zombie horror television series with an ensemble cast. Initially set in Atlanta, Georgia, the series centers on a diverse group of strangers from a wide array of racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds, who band together and fight to survive the constant threat of zombies or “walkers,” as well as other threats to their safety. As the seasons progress, the group becomes a family closely bonded by their shared experiences and respect for each other. In moments of crisis, members of the group, like Rick, Glenn, and Herschel often point out the specialness of the group’s unity. Prior to the zombie apocalypse their individual differences would have separated and prevented them from coming to care for each other as intimately as they do. The show once held one of the highest ratings of a cable-television show with mass viewership that rivaled sports programs (Ridgely). It was preceded only by the British horror comedy-drama mini-series *Dead Set*, which aired two years prior. *The Walking Dead* can still be considered a pioneer in zombie apocalypse television shows that deal extensively with long-term survival. The series was the catalyst for the genre’s postmillennial popularity, spawning other popular zombie TV shows, such as *Z-Nation*, and its own spin-offs like *Fear the Walking Dead*, *The Walking Dead: World Beyond*, and the upcoming *Tales of the Walking Dead*. Its longevity has resulted in ten seasons, with the series currently airing its eleventh and final season.

### **Deconstructing “The Bridge”: Michonne**

Michonne is a unique black female character within zombie horror because she has two iterations that stem across two forms of visual media—the comic books and the television series. Both conform to facets of the SBW controlling image. Comparing and contrasting the different elements of Michonne’s representation in the television series to her representation in the comic books reveal the extent to which figurations of blackness are present in her

construction. Specifically, the choice the show's creators make to minimize Michonne's rape-revenge plot diminishes her personal and sexual agency. Michonne does not complete the cycle of the Dark Other because her narrative end does not result in death. She can be viewed as an emancipated character until her exit in season 11, as she is haunted by the death of Rick. Her character becomes trapped in trauma again. Michonne is an important black female character within postmillennial zombie horror because of her visibility and agency. Her character is iconic and integral to *The Walking Dead* franchise. Her enactment of the black femme function is indicated in the way that she disrupts Rick's group dynamics and the hierarchical patriarchal cowboy culture. She is identified as a threat to this order. She assimilates or integrates into this group, becoming a leader. Her relationship with Rick as the white male patriarchal hero heightens the complexity of her position as an Other.

Also, like Selena, Michonne is another knife-wielding black femme in a post-apocalyptic world. *The Walking Dead* also shares similar allusions to *28 Days Later* in which the white male showrunner Rick Grimes (Andrew Lincoln) also wakes up from a coma in a hospital bed. Michonne is a striking figure in both the comic books and the television series as she carries with her a katana and travels with two chained and de-jawed "pet" zombies trailing behind her.



As Michonne's backstory is slowly revealed her sharper edges are slowly softened. In the episode "After," the audience learns that before the zombie apocalypse Michonne had quite a normal and contented life with her boyfriend Mike and her three-year-old son Andre. The loss of her family almost drives her to give up on her life. However, unlike *28 Days Later*, where the backstory is never fully explained in the film but was developed off-screen by the director Danny Boyle and the actress Naomie Harris to explain her behavior (X-Ray IMDB), Michonne is given seven seasons of context and dimensionality. The viewer gets to witness and experience what drives and motivates Michonne. As black female characters are often not allowed nuance and often experience limited affective engagement because of it, Michonne stands out as a character who is multi-faceted. Television has the advantage of being episodic with more time to develop complex character arcs.

Where *28 Days Later* presents the British empire in ruin and suggests that a return to normalcy is not sustainable, *The Walking Dead* presents a more conventional zombie plot that emphasizes the white male survivalist fantasy. Thematically, it focuses on white male authority figures who either prey on or protect the vulnerable. Vulnerable survivors are caught in the middle of these white men battling it out, such as Rick versus the seasons 2-3 antagonist the Governor, and in seasons 6-8, Negan. The group of survivors, led by Rick, are initially seeking a return to white hegemonic patriarchal norms, despite their diversity. The group dynamics quickly develop a hierarchy of who serves what role. Although the show was largely considered to be post-racial at the time, the racial and gendered politics of *The Walking Dead* are a constant subtext. In this landscape that stresses the creation of a new world, Michonne exhibits a cautionary reserve. As a black woman who initially is treated as a threat, she appears mindful of the dangers of deciding who are the “good people” that this new world belongs to.

### **Sister Outsider**

Michonne is marked as an Other or outsider from the moment that she is introduced in Season 3. Her othering or the highlighting of her difference is clearly marked as a spectacle that associates her and her black femaleness with mystery and masculinizes her. Brooks asserts that Michonne’s “blackness is implicitly associated with a certain masculinity that actively separates her from rote ideas of femininity associated with the ideals of white womanhood: demure, domestic, delicate, and in constant need of male protection” (33). Her striking appearance, from her dark complexion to her pet zombies, identify her as different, and more pointedly, as dangerous. The group has begun to learn to distrust strangers, however, at this point in the series, most newcomers are given the benefit of the doubt, even at the expense of the group. However, Michonne is distrusted almost immediately and treated as an enemy. This

is an early sign that Michonne, through the black femme function, disrupts the dynamic of Rick's group.

Michonne disrupts the dynamic of the group with her strength. Initially, the group of survivors is not as lethal as they are characterized in later seasons. The white women in the series, like Carol and Maggie, and to a lesser degree Andrea, are still operating within the conventional construction of white femininity/womanhood as needing to be protected and who have "purposely domesticated and typically feminized" (Brooks 33). From Season 1 to Season 3, gender dynamics indicate the return to a primitive traditionalism, where men must exhibit protective savagery and women are expected to cook, clean, and run (Garland 70-71). This shifts after Season 3, as the group becomes more cohesive in their hardened post-apocalyptic identity as efficient killers of both Walker and living threats. As the group experiences greater and greater trials and tragedy, a fluid survivalist mindset is imparted, where everyone regardless of sex, must be able to defend and or be the aggressor. However, in Season 3, Michonne is distinct as the only woman who is clearly a warrior and is adept at protecting herself, as the men.

Throughout *The Walking Dead*, anger is a driving tool that radicalizes its female characters into action, yet Michonne's anger seems to initially be considered an inconvenience. In her essay "The Uses of Anger," from her collection of essays *Sister Outsider*, poet and scholar Audre Lorde wrote that "everything can be used / except what is wasteful / (you will need / to remember this when you are accused of destruction" (127). Anger can be expressed and translated in a way that is empowering and serves a liberatory purpose. Its delineation can be directed to discern who is an ally and who is an enemy. We see this occur with Carol, who transforms from a timid woman victimized by her abusive husband to a woman of deep resolve

who can protect herself and others. Michonne's opportunities to make "use" of her anger are frustrated by other characters like Andrea and Rick who either berate or stop her from acting.

How Michonne is characterized is made that much more interesting because she is born of a directly visual medium/media. Her visual appearance does not significantly change much from comic books to the television screen; however, both pay close attention to her physique, especially her muscularity. Her dark skin, loc'd hair, and phenotypically black features are all unambiguous markers of her racial difference. It is impressed upon the reader and viewer that Michonne possesses a unique toughness. Her entry is unusual and mysterious [a spectacle] as she leads two "pet" zombies on a chain who protect her from other zombies. This heightens the sense that she is supernatural and possesses a mystical or primitive ability to control zombies. This is a pertinent association because zombies are heavily racially coded and the Monstrous-Other often serves as a stand-in for the racialized Other. The truth is twofold. Michonne has found a practical way to protect herself. The jaws of her pet zombies are broken so that they cannot bite her.

Her physicality and her prowess at killing zombies initially set her apart from the other women in the crew of survivors. Because she exudes toughness and an embattled exterior; our first impression of Michonne seems to cling to the SBW stereotype as cold, unfeeling, and driven by hate and anger. If there is anyone that comes close to being portrayed in a similar fashion it is Carol, who displays a certain ruthlessness during the third season that becomes central to her characters (and staying alive). However, even Carol is initially characterized as a shrinking and pitiful woman who is abused by her husband. Her vulnerability is built first before we see her empowerment arc. Michonne's outsider status shifts and she becomes integrated into the group and develops over the course of several seasons as she proves her

commitment and loyalty to the group. She proves that she is a good person and willing to fight and die for the group's survival. In this light, Michonne does not seem to be a revolutionary character, because she ultimately conforms and integrates into this new family. In Alexandria, Michonne is a deputy and Rick is the sheriff. This seems to maintain a certain hierarchy and that Michonne is in a lesser position. However, Michonne maintains a belief in parity and fairness. When Rick goes on a crazed rant, she knocks him out for his own good as his ego threatens the safety of everyone. Rick is driven to protect white womanhood again. Michonne makes decisions that are based on her own judgment and sense of what is right even if that is at odds with what Rick deems as the best course of actions.

The group embraces a moral relativism based on an "us or them" model. While Rick's group does not actively seek to make enemies, they will prioritize their self-preservation, safety, and livelihood over others who are not a part of their family or who threaten their family. They are willing to fight and die for each other. The family views themselves as good people who do what they need to do to survive. They appoint themselves as protectors of good as they shed blood to create "peace." The world of *The Walking Dead* is very similar to the inception of America. This is captured in the episode "A New Beginning," when the group scavenges an old museum for a wagon. As Michonne, walk through the halls talking about democracy and voting for a governor for Hilltop.

The character of Merle (Michael Rooker) consistently marks Michonne's apparent black femininity and attempts to degrade her. He derisively calls her a "black bitch" and "Nubian queen." Merle is meant to be The Racist, so it is not surprising for him to demarcate Michonne in this way. But she is still not seen as worthy of protection by Rick, who treats her curtly until he feels that he can trust her. This process takes much longer than it does for other

characters, and to some degree, his aversion seems unwarranted. Why must his trust be so hard-earned when he has easily accepted others into his group with less to vouch for them?

Michonne's femaleness and her black femaleness directly challenge him. How he treats her demarcates her racial difference.

Michonne and Andrea's experience in Woodbury serves as a stark example of the difference between how the black femme exists at the fringe or the gray area. The Governor is representative of a white male authority figure or structure. Similarly, to the symbols of Empire and British imperialism in *28 Days Later*, he stands for everything that is currently in decay. He keeps grisly (the grotesque) mementos of the past as he attempts to recreate the systems of patriarchy and domination. This is a running theme throughout *The Walking Dead* as the men attempt to dominate and oppress the most precious resource in the post-apocalyptic world, other people. Within this world that he tries to recreate, Michonne is a problem. Michonne does not trust his intentions. However, Andrea is seduced by his promises. She quickly abandons, gaslights, and betrays Michonne in favor of the Governor and the patriarchal carrot that he waves. The Governor indicates his lack of respect for Michonne throughout her and Andrea's arrival. Later, he is obsessed with killing her because she "kills" his daughter.

### **The Black Female Body/Punishment**

As discussed previously, Michonne is delineated as an outsider and her black female body is proscribed as Spectacle in both the comic books and the television series to emphasize her strength and prowess. This emphasis both reinforces the SBW stereotype and is also empowering in the way that Michonne uses her anger to forge meaning for herself. Part of the SBW stereotype calls for stoicism in the face of trauma and violence, yet Michonne's vulnerability is given attention and developed in both the comic books and the television show.

However, in some ways, Michonne displays a more nuanced character development in *The Walking Dead* comic books than in the television series, and nowhere is this more apparent than the erasure of Michonne's rape, which is one of the major differences between the two. A significant plot point with the comic books, this aspect of Michonne's story arc is omitted. Although there is ample opportunity for character development in a television series, the conservatism of *The Walking Dead* positions Michonne as more in service to the needs and desires of other characters in seasons 2-3 as she tries to gain the groups' trust.

The television series tones down the Governor's degradation of Michonne. In the comic books, the Governor uses rape as punishment and retaliation against Michonne multiple times. The comic book is quite graphic in its portrayal of the Governor's brutality toward Michonne. The Governor's rape and torture of Michonne is a significant development in the comic books and it is one of the main factors that drive Michonne's vengeance plot. The showrunners may have considered the rape and torture of Michonne by the Governor as potentially too racially controversial as it directly alludes to the racialized sexual violence and victimization experienced by black women at the hands of white men throughout American history. Regardless, the authoritative white slave-master to an enslaved black woman relationship is the subtext that is present, and minimizing this aspect of the Governor and his vile treatment of Michonne elides Michonne's experience. Black women are displaced, such as when their "experiences of rape" are portrayed as "a historical problem that is no longer relevant" or to "reveal white men's villainous racism" (Projansky 162). When a Black woman is raped, even if her rape is central to the storyline, she is silenced, and her trauma is overlooked (193). The suppression and displacement of Black women, and women of color generally, in texts about

rape highlights the difficulties popular culture has in exploring the intersection of race and sexual violence.

A colorblind approach to Michonne and the show's removal of the rape-revenge plot involving her and the Governor reveals how a failure to contextualize race and gender identity contributes to erasure. It is apparent that "Michonne's intersecting identities demand more from Clover's rape-revenge protagonist paradigm, for her intersections necessitate an expansion that includes race" (Brooks 35). It is possible that the showrunners were attempting to avoid the shock value of rape-trauma porn and removed this element of the story to avoid such problematic voyeuristic displays of racialized gendered violence. But it is more likely that it was muted and only alluded to in favor of making the Governor a more sympathetic character. In the comic books, the Governor's character is written as apparently evil. The television show sought to give the Governor a more "humanized take" (Bonomolo), that offers the Governor a redemptive arc. In fact, the erasure of Michonne's victimization by the Governor is taken a step further as the show takes Michonne's rape and shifts it to the white female character of Maggie, who is also assaulted by the Governor and forced to remove her clothes while he watches. Maggie's positionality activates the affective engagement of the viewer in a more familiar and codified way.

In a rape fantasy, "pain and injury" experienced by the victim may be "simplistically resolved away in the course of the plot through the relentless obfuscation of the perpetrator's power and domination and the victim's consent, acceptance, and forgiveness" (Chapman 143). While Michonne does not forgive The Governor in any capacity, her abuse at his hands is minimized by other characters, like Andrea and Rick. Andrea ignores and openly disparages Michonne's experience and concerns, even after observing her physical injuries. She judges and

questions Michonne but seeks to understand The Governor and his motives. She gives The Governor multiple opportunities to show himself to be a better man and consciously chooses to turn a blind eye to his violence. She even says that she is attracted to it and him because of his toxic masculinity. Her objectification makes The Governor's promise more appealing whereas Michonne recognizes that her value to the Governor is not equivalent. She was never a part of his vision of a future and she is directly inimical to his attempts to recreate his patriarchal fantasy with Andrea.

### **Love in the Time of Walkers**

Michonne is treated as a viable love interest to Rick's white male lead which is refreshingly progressive as black women have had a history of being cast as the least desirable or undesirable. Either desexualized or hypersexualized, both extremes situate black women outside of the norms for the lead female love interest. Yet, in Season 6, after slow burn over several seasons, Michonne and Rick's romantic relationship, or #Richonne begins in the episode "The Next World." Where the television series merges some of the plotlines that belong to other characters within the comic books with Michonne and omits or obfuscates other Michonne's plot points, the romantic partnership between them is entirely invented by the television series. There is never a relationship between Michonne and Rick in the comic books. Michonne's status as a leading lady is solidified in her primetime television role by her relationship with Rick, the male lead. That she is a love interest is significant in that black women are often not allowed to be desirable. The status quo relegates black women to loveless sidekicks.

AMC's decision to emphasize Michonne and Rick's relationship is perhaps one of the first and few instances on television where a black woman as a lead character is in a

relationship with a white male. It is also interesting to consider in terms of the reluctance media has shown toward depicting interracial relationships between black women and non-black men. The first highly controversial on-screen kiss between a black woman and white man was shared by Nichelle Nichols as Lt. Uhura and William Shatner as Captain Kirk in *Star Trek: The Original Series* in 1968, and, in modern parlance, “broke the internet” when it initially aired. While not nearly as controversial in the 21st-century, contemporary black female-white male interracial pairings are perhaps not as ubiquitous as other interracial pairings. In a heteronormative context, the status quo limits black female characters. The black female character cannot be more conventionally desirable than the heterosexual white female lead or be sexually competitive in a real way. Even in instances where chemistry is apparent between characters and actors<sup>6</sup>, showrunners have refused to initiate black female and non-black male interracial pairings, even at the fans' requests and/or disappointment.

The strictly intra-racial romantic relationships that Michonne has in the comic books and the interracial relationship between Michonne and Rick in the television show also illustrate a subtle contrast in representation of black female sexuality that indicates a societal perception of black women as less worthy of partnership. Where the television show falls short by projecting a rape fantasy onto Michonne, it does succeed in organically developing a romantic relationship between Michonne and Rick. In regards to interracial relationships in film and television, romantic relationships between dark-skinned black female characters and white male leads are less common. When they do occur, it may be under circumstances that engage

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<sup>6</sup> The CW series *The Vampire Diaries* is a perfect example of this. Show creator Julie Plec refused to develop a relationship between the black female character Bonnie (Katerina Graham) and the white male lead Damon (Ian Somerholder), despite there being a precedent for Bonnie/Damon relationship within the book series that the television show is based on, the chemistry between the actors themselves and their interest in an on-screen romance, and significant shipping of the characters within the fandom.

the Jezebel stereotype for the black female character, and therefore still refer back to constructions of black femininity as hypersexual, destructive, and deviant in some way (McTaggart et al. 13). *The Walking Dead* breaks this stereotype. It positions Michonne as a viable love interest and as a natural and equal partner to Rick. This makes her adoption of Carl and Judith less a re-inscription of mammy-like role and more of a disruption of the conservative conception of the patriarchal family, which is encoded as white and monogamous. Where black womanhood and sexuality is typically encoded as a subversive threat to the white family and is pathologized, in this post-apocalyptic setting where family and intimate connections have become increasingly less beholden to former societal expectations, Michonne is more than just a convenient nanny figure.

On the other hand, while the comic books do not desexualize Michonne or make her too strong and independent to have any romantic relationships, they do reinforce the idea that Michonne can only be a desirable and viable love interest within her racial group. This rule does not apply to white women, or other women of color, who are usually positioned as naturally desirable to all races of men. In the comic books, Michonne has two relationships, both with black men. She is never paired with a white man, and she is situated as a hypersexual seductive aggressor reminiscent of the Jezebel stereotype. She initiates a sexual relationship with the black male character Tyrese, although he has a girlfriend, a dainty blond-haired white woman. The comic book Michonne is contrasted against Tyrese's girlfriend, who eschews what she considers dirty sexual behavior whereas Michonne is characterized as naturally possessing earthy sexuality and is comfortable performing what Tyrese's girlfriend refuses to do. Tyrese is shown as being unable to resist Michonne who overpowers him with her desire and sexual

proress (Brooks 34). Again, in comparison to the comic books, the television show does the opposite of hypersexualizing Michonne, neither overtly hypersexualizing nor desexualizing her.

When read from a non-intersectional feminist perspective, the consummation of heteronormative romantic relationships between co-leads may not be considered progressive. This particular critique is often leveled at black female-white male interracial relationships in film and television. However, when looked at through an oppositional gaze, a black female love interest of the male lead disrupts the misogynoiristic construction that black women are the least desirable. Michonne and Rick's relationship develops gradually and is not impacted by any negative circumstances that would increase viewers' dislike for her. With the death of Lori and Jessica, a potential Lori-like replacement, Michonne does not have to compete with Rick's former idealization and hope for recreating his family, and there is no relationship that she interrupts or becomes a third party to. Michonne and Rick's relationship is allowed to be unencumbered by love triangles, unrequited feelings, or infidelity. There are not any valid narrative reasons to object to #Richonne other than race. To leave Michonne without a pairing as a so-called feminist angle would also mean that the relationships that other strong female characters, like Carol and Maggie form are equally anti-feminist. Instead Michonne is equally positioned as worthy of love, as tough and vulnerable, as human.

### **Walking Off into the Sunset?**

Michonne does not remain static. In a similar fashion to Selena, she gradually lets her guard down as she begins to feel safer and is welcomed into Rick's group. As Michonne becomes softer, the viewer can reinterpret the meaning of her silence and stare. The nuances of her personality become less blunted visual spectacle as does away with the cape and the pet zombies. However, in light of the significant traumas she has experienced, when Rick is

presumed to be dead, Michonne returns to being suspicious and hardened. Her suspicion returns and she is hardened to strangers because of an incident involving an old friend. Michonne's unquestioned trust of her friend leads to the murder of several children, and nearly kills Judith. Michonne is unable to forgive herself for this and views herself as responsible. As a character who has experienced a great deal of personal loss, her return to fear and reserve is understandable. In the end, her narrative is unresolved or interrupted, as Michonne departs from the show in search of Rick, leaving Judith and RJ, in the care of Daryl.

Unlike Selena's narrative resolution which offers hope and the suggestion of a to-be-continued happy ending, Michonne is a black Final Girl who survives to the end, but seems to fall somewhere between liberation and abjection. The choices made by the television series creators reflect a certain contradictoriness and straddle the line between being regressive and empowering. Yet, Michonne's presence and her integration into Rick's group and her journey to becoming a family mirror the struggle that black women have when existing in spaces that do not always welcome us. She forges a place for herself and for her voice to be heard. She sets the stage for Roberta, who is more firmly situated and secure in her sense of family and belonging, but who also possesses a complicated narrative resolution.

### **Chapter 3 Lay Her Burden Down: (Un)Laboring the Black Final Girl in *Z Nation***

Created by Karl Schaefer and Craig Engler, *Z Nation* first aired on the SYFY channel in 2014. *Z Nation* takes the idea of the quixotic quest to save humanity and return to “normal” and turns it on its head. A campy and decidedly quirky adventure spanning five seasons, the television series consciously satirizes its predecessor *The Walking Dead*, and parodies many of the tropes within the zombie genre. *Z Nation* specifically pokes fun at the self-important and serious approach that *The Walking Dead* series takes toward the zombie apocalypse. It follows a group of survivors who are tasked with protecting and transporting Murphy, a man whose blood holds the antibodies key to the development of a vaccine, across the zombie-ridden United States from New York to the last CDC laboratory outpost in California.

Building upon the characterizations set by her predecessors, in comparison to Selena and Michonne, Lt. Roberta Warren (Kellita Smith) is an unconventional black Final Girl whose construction is the least centered around a process of de-alienating her. Roberta adds a refreshing variety to the black Final Girl and the characterizations set by Selena and Michonne in *28 Days Later* and *The Walking Dead*. Roberta does not have to work as hard to prove her emotional complexity to others. She demands it. Ex-National Guard member, Roberta’s mixture of toughness and vulnerability is more immediately at the forefront of her narrative. Her resiliency is obviously a factor of her former career. Whereas Selena, in a sense, must prove her vulnerability to the viewer, Roberta’s emotional complexity is centered, supported, and validated by her friends from the outset. And where Michonne is an outsider who must prove her belongingness, Roberta is automatically situated as a key decision-maker within a considerably more democratic and equitable group structure than the early dynamics between genders in *The Walking Dead*. Roberta more readily occupies a space that deconstructs the SBW stereotype, although her persistent commitment to the mission to save humanity does

place her heroism in a position where she is constantly laboring in service of the white male character Murphy (Keith Allan). However, more significantly, Roberta engages in a greater complication of the black Final Girl as she technically dies in Season 5 of the series, and becomes a Talker, a type of sentient zombie. Unlike other Talkers, Roberta essentially has special powers, as she does not crave brains and functions essentially like a living person. Her death serves to transcode the racialized trope of death and abjection, playing into and subverting the trope simultaneously.

### **The Art of Not Giving...Too Much: Roberta**

As a series that is highly aware of itself and the first SYFY series with a black female lead, it is interesting to examine how Roberta is portrayed throughout the series. *Z Nation* diverges somewhat from the pattern of black female absence by its inclusion of Roberta. Typically, there will be a black and male presence, whether a singular token black male actor in an otherwise entirely white cast or multiple, which then further highlights the absence of black women. Except for the first several episodes, with the one black male soldier who seems to be the initial protagonist of the show, the series is mostly devoid of black men. However, black womanhood is singular and rare in *Z Nation*. Roberta exists in a vacuum. She is essentially the only black woman in the show and potentially one of the last black women in the world. There are not many black characters, men, or women, who are recurring characters or who populate the background scenes as extras. As stated earlier, the world of *Z Nation* does not lack a certain diversity, there are Native Americans and Mexicans, however, many of these moments are one-offs. Like *The Walking Dead*, *Z Nation* also seems to espouse a certain post-racial aesthetic or race-lessness, with the notion that there are bigger concerns than race, where the racial difference becomes a non-factor in face of human survival.

Known for her roles in popular black sitcoms like *The Bernie Mac Show*, *Z Nation* was a departure for Smith. In an interview with BET, Smith recounts that the role of Roberta in *Z Nation* was one that she “never thought [she] would be able to actually get in Hollywood because normally [what they] do is try to pigeonhole you in the role that you last did well” (Reese). This speaks volumes about the scarcity of black women in genres like horror that are considered less stereotypically black. Profitability and viewer relatability are oft-cited reasons why black female characters are not cast as showrunners. Smith’s role would be the first time a black woman, or black person, would lead a show on the SYFY channel, and it is possible that SYFY sought to capitalize on the popularity of Michonne and *The Walking Dead*. Smith’s perception of the role as uncommon supports the idea that Roberta is a more unconventional black Final Girl in postmillennial zombie horror than audiences have seen.

That said, *Z Nation* appears to follow the pattern established by its post-millennial zombie horror predecessors *28 Days Later* and *The Walking Dead* of a “strong” black femme opposite a white male lead. But it quickly diverges from that trope as Sgt. Charles Garnett (Tom Everett Scott), the group’s initial white male leader, is killed off relatively early in episode 6 of the first season. In a role reversal, it is not Roberta the black femme, who is the first of the team to die at all. *Z Nation* succeeds in setting itself apart from the dynamic of Michonne and Rick in *The Walking Dead*, where the show, up until actor Andrew Lincoln’s exit in Season 9, tends to revolve around him, his role as the de facto leader, and his hero/anti-hero struggle. Roberta emerges as the leader of her team without a direct white male authority to which she is subject to. Her agency is apparent and is not subsumed and overshadowed.

Roberta, like Selena and Michonne, is also tough black femme with a phallic weapon. But again, she also is markedly different aesthetically. Unlike Selena, whose appearance is

guided by the pragmatism of survival, or Michonne, who essentially wears the same outfit throughout the entire series. With *Z Nation's* camp influence, Roberta is styled a lot closer to the Blaxploitation heroines like Pam Grier and Tamara Dobson.



Roberta is presented as beautiful, smart, and resilient. While these are typical traits for a lead female character, for a black femme in a zombie horror movie, where black women are often desexualized or masculinized, this is also progressive territory. It departs from the masculinized aesthetic that is common for the black femme in zombie horror, especially if she is dark-skinned. Roberta's physicality is not presented as unusually strong, ruthless, or excessively aggressive. Her toughness and resilience are signaled by her skills as related to her former career as a lieutenant in the National Guard. Her desirability as a woman is consistently articulated throughout the series, and she forms several significant romantic and platonic

relationships. Her positionality as one of the most important characters in the show situates her humanity as relevant, which suggests the relevance of black women in the future.

While she is sexualized, she is not objectified. The range that her character is given to be multifaceted is not just indicated by the fluidity of her appearance but her emotional range, which, as mentioned previously, is expressed early on and delineates her as feeling as opposed to the stoic attitude of the SBW. In an interview with *Rolling Out* Smith mentions the unusual depth of Roberta's

character:

So, when I read the words of the character, who had this complex, emotional turn in a matter of a couple drinks in a bar, I saw her transition five times in one moment. I said, "Who writes like this for a woman? No one writes like that!" Usually, [female characters] are either pissed, or we love you. Super boring! However, this character gave these complexities that made me say, "I have to go to this audition." (Monique)

The scene in question occurs in season 1 episode 7 "Welcome to the FU-Bar." In this episode, Roberta processes her grief after the death of Charles. She ignores the group and their mission to transport Murphy and withdraws into indifference. For the entirety of the episode, Roberta is emotionally vulnerable and overwhelmed. She dissociates from reality, and this throws the group into chaos. Until this moment the group has overly relied on Roberta's leadership, and they are at a loss of how to deal with this demoralized version of Roberta. They give her the space to work out her grief and feelings. Prior to that episode, in "Home Sweet Zombie," Roberta is also given the time and space to process the death of her husband, who died during the beginning of the zombie apocalypse, and find closure. The emotional complexity and range that Roberta cycles through in this episode bring into focus what happens when the black femme is exist operates outside of the SBW controlling image and expectation to endure.

Roberta's strength and resiliency, or rather its failure, does reveal the group's dependency on her emotional and physical labor. The invisible emotional labor that Roberta performs enables the group to function almost like children, looking toward the responsible and dependable mother role that Roberta, in some ways, takes on. The real-world expectation of the SBW is that she will take on the burdens of others. Murphy benefits from Roberta's desire to save humanity and her subsequent protection of him. As Murphy tells Roberta, "I need you. Whatever makes you go and never stop" ("The Siege of Murphytown"). Roberta's sense of duty and commitment, likely ingrained in her from being in the military, is what makes Roberta's emotional processing of loss so impactful because, in doing so, she completely deprioritized the group to withdraw into herself. When labor is one of the ways that society assigns black women to value, self-care is a radical act.

Of course, it can be pointed out that Roberta is still required to pull herself together for the sake of the group. Other members of the group are allowed to wallow or sulk for several episodes before their emotional drama is resolved, like Murphy who mourns the loss of his daughter over the course of a season, or Addy, who spends several episodes coming to terms with her repressed memory of accidentally killing her mother. Because it is for only one episode that Roberta is unable to function, it sends the message that Roberta must exercise an acceptable time frame for her grief. Roberta's grief could stand to be explored further. Roberta is allowed to be vulnerable for one to two episodes before she is once again required to pull herself together and resolve her grief and depression. However, her agency lies in the fact that she does take the time for herself. Her recovery is less for the sake of the group and more for her own sense of purpose and healing.

## The Second Coming

Where her grief and vulnerability complicate the superhuman strength ascribed to the SBW, her performance of labor for the sake of humanity, also becomes a performance of labor that is in service of white characters. According to writer Brooke Bennett, “Roberta is arguably performing physical labor for Murphy by constantly protecting him, making it her ethical mission to deliver him to the CDC” (318). She and Murphy are situated as opposites. Murphy is self-serving whereas Roberta is concerned with the welfare of the group and the group’s missions to save humanity. She becomes the leader of the group; she is seen as the group’s moral compass. The extent to which Roberta performs emotional labor for the group treads a fine line between the self-sacrificial characteristics of the mammy and healthy maternalism and threatens to detract from the emotional nuance and vulnerability that her character is given. While Murphy may have a Christ-like key to saving humanity through his blood, he is, ironically, not a great white hope or savior. It is Roberta who is the messianic figure.

Roberta’s heroism is highlighted against Murphy’s attributes. Even as Roberta may remain somewhat paired with Murphy as a white male lead, Murphy is contextually different from the typical white male lead. Not only because he is consistently portrayed as a “highly weak and unmasculine figure, in striking distinction from characters such as Rick Grimes in *The Walking Dead*” (Bennett 318), but also because he serves as a monstrous Other. His immunity has made him into something not entirely human, but a type of hybrid whose blood has special properties to control others and put them under a spell. Because he views himself as an outsider who has never belonged to or fit in with society, and, at every turn, his distrust of authority drives his undisguised desire to sabotage his friends’ attempts to save humanity. In stark contrast to Murphy, who has the power to save humanity, but chooses not to, Roberta

maintains a steadfast belief in the group's original mission. Murphy contends that he has never had a reason to believe in the goodness of humanity. In fact, he goes so far as to use his hybridity to control and grossly abuses his power. Roberta, on the other hand, pushes herself and the group to achieve this goal, even as many of the group grow disillusioned or weary. Roberta maintains her faith in the purpose of their goal.

Roberta's heroism is what drives her to give of herself and leads her, not Murphy's authority. While still fulfilling the group's original missions, she is inexplicably drawn to understand a vision that she has of another apocalyptic event and acts to try to stop it. She succeeds, but dies in the process. However, she does not intentionally sacrifice herself. She does not even realize that she has died and "turned." Roberta's death, or un-death, transcodes the racialized trope of death and abjection because in her death-not death she has agency other characters do not possess. She is also unlike any other hybrid, who can be controlled by Murphy, or any Talker, who needs to eat "biscuits" made out of brains in order to remain sentient. In her last decision while still alive and human and even in her death, she retains control over her personal choices and her bodily autonomy.

## Conclusion

### **Breaking the Cycle: The Emancipation of the Black Femme**

To truly break the horror trope of black death and abjection, it is not enough for the black Final Girl to just survive and “endure.” She must triumph. As mentioned previously, stereotypes like the SBW have not remained static. As the film industry has gradually shifted to be more inclusive, diverse, and multicultural, controlling images have also evolved in the post-racial environment. The re-inscription of the SBW is subtler and less obviously harmful. Horror still punishes black women and tells on society’s fear of challenging power-dominant hierarchies. Orr reminds us that “just as slasher cinema arose during the crisis of masculinity that followed the Vietnam War, the punishment of black women in horror films reflects American culture’s distaste for our triple consciousness” (88). It suggests a cultural anxiety toward the ontological dilemma of intersectional identity. This triple consciousness, formulated “in response to racism, sexism, and homophobia” (Keeling 1-2) upsets race-sex hierarchy with its alterity. Misogynoiristic scripts can be traced within post-millennial trends in the media landscape that mimic a real-life disregard for black women’s lives. This is prescient and timely as we consider the social reality of black women, in which alarming statistics such as the black femicide rate do not receive as much attention, where black women receive less empathy within educational institutions and the workplace, where black women are more likely be unprotected, withstand pain, and are not believed. Where SBW stereotype is prevalent, devaluation of black women’s worthiness as human beings is encouraged.

Horror has often rarely deviated from this punishment of black women. If punishment is more often the norm, where does the black Final Girl go in a hostile environment? I believe that the black femme function and its orientation toward challenging racism, sexism and homophobia is a key factor in the punishment of the black female character within horror, even

as a Final Girl, because she disrupts the race-sex hierarchy. Whether the black Final Girl not only survives but achieves emancipation is indicative of the degree to which she is successful at disrupting racist and sexist constructions via the black femme function and breaking the cycle of the Dark Other, thus achieving, as Keeling terms it, “the witch’s flight,” or the ability to transcend. If she does not achieve emancipation, although she may survive, which is a triumph, it does not go beyond that and sometimes may even still reinforce conventional limitations for the black femme. Her narrative resolution then ends in haunting. This can be evidenced by a lack of narrative resolution that frustrates a happy or triumphant ending for the heroine. It can take the form of unrequited love. Whatever form it takes it reinforces the idea that black women must suffer in some and punishes them for surviving or attempting to thrive.

The final principle and step of the dark fantastic cycle is *emancipation*, which is only reached when the Dark Other is liberated from spectacle, embodied hesitation, violence, and haunting. Narratives with liberated Dark Others are rare, and are rarely as popular as those that feature trapped dark subjectivities. This positioning of the Dark Other in the fantastic requires radical rethinking of everything that we know. (Thomas 7)

I would also suggest that narratives with a liberated or emancipated black Final Girl are also rare for the same reason. It is difficult for individuals, audiences, and society to rethink ideas and perceptions of black femininity that are deeply ingrained in the Western racial imaginary. When these patterns are subverted, it is also difficult for audiences to find these portrayals believable because they do not conform to stereotypes or expected narrative patterns (7). Selena, Michonne, and Roberta all subvert the SBW stereotype and disrupt the expected narrative pattern in some way. Selena is both a protector and protected, Michonne is independent and partnered, and Roberta is a leader/savior and a believer. These diegetic narratives often have nondiegetic consequences. The punishment tropes that haunt black

women in horror films mirror the real-life effects of misogynoir to deny black female subjectivities. It is important that the black Final Girl not only survives but thrives.

### **Free Your Mind and the Rest Will Follow**

If thriving is not easy to achieve, regardless, whether or not the Final Girl survives. Can the black final girl ever be truly emancipated? The black Final Girl may then end up exhibiting some of the same pitfalls of the Enduring Woman, switching out a Blaxploitation era setting for the zombie apocalypse. Her resiliency can easily be repackaged as a positive quality that helps her to survive the undead. The black Final Girl may be found more frequently within post-apocalyptic zombie horror because that subgenre feels safe. There is something to be said that there does not seem to be any other black femme in zombie horror other than the “tough and resilient badass.” It does not seem to leave much room for the black femme to imagine and survive in zombie horror in ways that do not require them to already be skilled at surviving. To imagine black women surviving and thriving in a future where they are no longer called upon to endure requires rethinking ideas of Otherness that are ingrained into the Western racial and filmic imaginary.

Despite the claims that television shows like *The Walking Dead* and *Z Nation* are operating in a post racial world where race has ceased to matter, race still matters in the real world and in narrative alike. The template for the post-apocalyptic world is hard-pressed to escape from the figurations of blackness that continue to be present in the Western racial imaginary and the racist and sexist conventions of film. Selena, Michonne, and Roberta are, without question, important representations of the black femme within postmillennial zombie horror. They exist in mainstream cinema in roles that are considered post-racial, where race is not considered to matter, but where race clearly informs how their characters are perceived and

developed. As Final Girls, they are predecessors to the more complex and empowering representations of black femininity that are being created in what can be considered a neo-Gilded Age or post-*Get Out* era of black representation in horror. It is an age of horror where more is expected from writers, filmmakers, and audiences when it comes to race. The current focus on racial horror has brought about several films and television shows that deal directly with race.

In this current climate, are Selena, Michonne, and Roberta fully realized black female characters? Not quite, but they are active narrative agents. They act in ways that are more than woman-as-object. They save their families, save the future, and model new possibilities for the representation of black women in postmillennial zombie horror. Significantly, they illustrate that black women's pain and traumas are often misunderstood and ignored. In a digital age where the memefication of black female pain, bodies, and personalities for entertainment are quick to spread, empathetic imagination is crucial to seeing people as human and worthy. Misogynoir and controlling images encourage a racial empathy gap. Identification with the emancipated black Final Girl encourages the empathetic imagining of what black women in the real world should not have to endure or survive.

With the success of films like *Get Out* and shows like *Lovecraft Country* that explores post-racial horror and racial trauma. Horror is being created in a decidedly different climate with more diverse authorship and creators. Most recently, the 2021 remake of *Candyman* was the first high-grossing box office horror film directed by a black woman, Nia DaCosta. With more mainstream horror films with black women, films may begin to see the horror imaginary expanded. *The Walking Dead* is not finished yet. Although it is in its final season, the story of Michonne will continue in the films. Her narrative resolution is uncertain, but it holds the promise that she and Rick will reunite. *Z Nation* extends what a future really looks like and

what can be built from the ruins. In the end, it is Roberta, a black woman who saves us all. One thing that is certain is that black women inhabit a curious intersectional space, in a hierarchy of alterity, where they are the Other of Others, and they will continue to redefine what it means to be strong, what it means to be vulnerable, and what it means to be human.

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