

Praxis

Black (anti)fandom's intersectional politicization of *The Walking Dead* as a transmedia franchise

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[0.1] Abstract—Despite axiomatic industry and academic discourses of *The Walking Dead's* (2010–) status as quality TV—linked to its graphic visuals and compelling story lines—strong counterclaims question the text's (mis)representations of race and its propensity for systematically killing off Black male characters. An analysis of African Americans' responses to marginalized Black male characters politicizes the racial milieu of the series against the backdrop of wider racial relationships in the United States. Moreover, *The Walking Dead* is a successful transmedia franchise, and thus racial discourse shifts and changes, depending on which transmedia texts are being consumed. Thus, Black antifan rhetoric aimed at the spin-off series *Fear the Walking Dead* (2015–) centers on the zombification of Black men, a metaphor for the mistreatment and othering of young Black men by US police. Comparatively, *The Walking Dead* video game (Telltale Games, 2012) offers character development for its Black male lead character that fans praise against wider cultural representations in relation to both the franchise's hyperdiegesis and to video games in general. Therefore, Black audiences may read *The Walking Dead* as both racially reductive and radical. In doing so, aspects of self-identity, such as race, can inform (anti)fan positions through intersectional politics.

[0.2] Keywords—Audiences; Digital; Horror; Race; Social media; Television

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1. Introduction

[1.1] With its graphic cinematic visuals, complex narrative storytelling, killing off of key characters, and expansive hyperdiegesis, TV horror series *The Walking Dead* (2010–; *TWD*) has been framed within the discourse of quality TV (Jowett and Abbott 2013; Hassler-Forest 2016; Teurlings 2017). However, despite garnering cult and mainstream success, the series has been accused of an ongoing reductive mistreatment of persons of color, thus challenging its quality status (Steiger 2011; Johnson 2015; Smith 2017). Concurrently, although fan studies has done a great deal for analyzing active audience engagement around gender and sexuality (Brown 2001; Daniels 2012), it has neglected how race can play a central role in identity construction (Wanzo 2015; Johnson 2015), how race as lived and experienced can guide audiences' readings of a text (Bobo 1995; Carrington 2016), and how race can be performed and/or negotiated within online spaces (Steele 2016, 2018). To address these factors, in this essay, I undertake netnography to analyze audiences' "interaction styles, personal narratives, [and] communal exchanges" (Kozinets 2015, 3) on blogs, forums, and Twitter ([note 1](#)), thus permitting me to show how race and self-identity inform discursive prioritization for Black online audiences reading the *Walking Dead* franchise ([note 2](#)) whereby racial discourses/subtexts are elevated as the dominant analytical schema, one symbiotic with (anti)fan identity performance (Hills 2015; Steele 2016).

[1.2] In *TWD*, Black antifans challenge the text's characterization of its heteronormative white male hero, Rick Grimes (Andrew Lincoln), and its servile, passive secondary Black male characters. Going beyond simple readings of "capitulation or resistance" (Carrington 2016, 14), audiences negotiate these representations in relation to their own self-identity and lived experience of race in relation to the wider cultural climate in the United States. As such, online posts evidence a "politics of viewing"...[where]

representations are not simply judged on the basis of 'negative' or 'positive' stereotypes, but instead are interrogated in ways that illustrate their simultaneous grappling with the pleasures of media consumption, [and] concerns over potential influences of representations" (Chatman 2017, 300).

[1.3] In addition to highlighting the Walking Dead franchise's expansive transmedia matrix (Ecenbarger 2014), I turn to other Walking Dead texts where audiences of color engage with and utilize racial discourse in their responses. Significantly, *TWD* spin-off *Fear the Walking Dead* (2015–; *FTWD*) has also been criticized by Black audiences. However, although *TWD* antifan discourse oscillates around reductive passivity and the cyclic iterations of Black masculinity, online criticism of *FTWD* is aimed at the text's othering of the Black male body. Viewers read the zombification of Black men as mirroring the mistreatment of young African American men by US police forces and the state, with wider civic discourse used as part of the antifan vernacular. For many of the audiences analyzed, this oppression of Black masculinity within the text is emblematic of *TWD*, and for many Black antifans, *FTWD* reinforces ideological and racial discourse experienced both intratextually and culturally (Klastrup and Tosca 2016).

[1.4] It is worth highlighting that these differing yet overlapping readings of Black masculinity in *TWD* and *FTWD* resonate with long-standing racial othering in the United States (Nama 2008). Race is socially constructed, and "popular culture plays a role in mediating racial politics" (carrington 2016, 8). This has resulted in Black identity being structurally absent and/or omitted from the making of the modern North American history, with its focus on a white civilization (Weinbaum 2001), including in the horror and science fiction genres (Brooks 2014; Nama 2008). When race is brought to the fore, "much of the popular imagery of black masculinity derives from the experience of slavery in the American South and from the ghetto communities of the American North-east and Mid-west" (Jackson 1994, 54). As hooks writes, "Black males endure the worst imposition of gendered masculine patriarchal identity." Often "seen as animals, brutes, natural born rapists, and murderers" (2004, xii), the "predominant stereotype of black masculinity is of an unrestrained predatory and rapacious heterosexuality" (Jackson 1994, 54). Constructed by white fantasy and fear (Lott 1992), Black masculinity is positioned in opposition to hegemonic white masculinity (Guerrero 1993; Hopkins and Noble 2009; Brooks 2014), therefore justifying the former's racist oppression, pathologization, and eradication by the latter (Hatt 1992; Gordon 1997). Such considerations provide further depth to antifan discourse, identity construction, and textual interpretation.

[1.5] In contrast, Black audiences' discursive prioritization of TellTale's *The Walking Dead* (2012–; *TTTWD*) video game largely champions the video game series' first iteration. By offering progressive representations, the game provides players with agency via the character of Lee, an African American man. Posters at the TellTale community forum indicate not only how Black fans engage with the text, often read against *TWD*'s poor serving of characters of color and wider cultural representations, but also how their intersecting race-fan identities are negotiated within the wider community. Resultantly, discursive prioritizations can instigate communal antagonism as well as solidarity.

[1.6] However, it is not the case that "in order to understand the full story of many transmedia franchises, a consumer must seek out each text that contributes to that overall narrative" (Calbreath-Frasieur 2015, 222). I thus extrapolate the ergodic sequencing of gaming applied to *TTTWD* to account for audiences' selective movement through the Walking Dead franchise and the shifting readings made by Black audiences (Aarseth 1997). As a result, discursive prioritizations are as much procedural (narrative development) as they are semiotic (representations) (Sicart 2013). This stance permits me to not only pay due attention to fans of color but also to critically explore how African American audiences engage with *TWD* as a transmedia franchise through the intersectional experiences of race, both culturally and in textual representations. Such a stance therefore challenges existing axioms of quality television content and/or audiences. I begin by analyzing the most popular iteration of this franchise: the television series.

2. Questioning quality: *TWD*'s Black antifans

[2.1] Although detailed textual analysis is outside my scope here, it is useful to establish how others have read *TWD* to contextualize representations of race and gender that Black audiences subsequently engage with. There are two common routes for analysis. First is to analyze the text against a wider sociopolitical backdrop. *TWD*, as part of the twenty-first-century "zombie renaissance" (Bishop 2015, 5), provides the figure of the undead to represent the horror genre's internalization of the trauma inflicted by the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack (Briefel and Miller 2011; Wetmore 2012; Simpson 2014), which resulted in the need

for human survivors to embrace "violence, atavism, and antisocial behavior," which in turn may "be interpreted as a cultural indictment of...aggressive US foreign and domestic policies" (Bishop 2015, 19). Second is to address existential questions that arise out of the threat of zombiedom and the postapocalyptic landscape, which humans must try to survive. Because *TWD* "is an ongoing serial narrative, it is distinctive in its orientation to the *human survivors* and their struggle to re-constitute something that looks like a viable social order in the post-apocalyptic world" (Keetley 2014, 6). Such a focus asks what it means to be human in such an inhumane diegesis.

[2.2] Bennett's (2015) analysis of *TWD*, which relies on Lotz's (2014) male-centered serial model, focuses on Rick as the text's central white male hero in a combination of both reading frameworks. According to Bennett, *TWD* is situated alongside other "stories told about men in a multiplicity of scripted [TV] series... [that] delve into the psyches and inner lives of their male characters," depicting "male characters' feelings and relationships in stories that probe the trials and complexities of contemporary manhood in a manner previously uncommon...for this storytelling medium" (Lotz 2014, 5). As a result, both perspectives focus on Rick and his faction's ongoing attempts to survive against the threats of monstrous zombie hordes and abject humans. Hassler-Forest (2011) explains that Rick as the central hero, combined with a lack of Black male characters, privileges white, heterosexual, middle-class, patriarchal order. Similarly, Keetley argues that Rick's banishing of "all racial difference (shaping his post-apocalyptic world as 'post-racial') allows it to creep back unrecognized, and killing the zombie can thus easily become...the 'thinnest sublimation' of violence against the racialized colonial object" (2014, 9). Therefore, readings from alternative perspectives—such as that of race—call *TWD*'s representations into question.

[2.3] Significantly, despite *TWD*'s popularity, empirical audience research around *TWD* is lacking—an issue endemic to horror studies in general (Barker et al. 2016). However, Teurlings (2017) focuses on audience schemas addressing *TWD*'s quality status. Teurlings's analysis of online commentary indicates a degree of (proto)professional television criticism through "aesthetic and taste arguments" (6). The former praises *TWD* for its "character development, originality of plotline, or resistance to romantic or narrative closure" (7), while the latter comprise "arguments that, after all other arguments have failed, ultimately fall back on the comfortable sofa of value pluralism: everybody has the right to their own tastes and opinions" (6). Such data reinforce *TWD*'s accreditation as quality TV.

[2.4] However, audience-based research also indicates that when *TWD*'s quality discourse is challenged by wider racial and gendered critiques, specifically the representation of the character of Michonne (Danai Gurira), online white fans largely refute such readings, often inimically. Johnson (2015) finds "antiblack misogyny" present "in audience readings of Michonne's storyline and characterization," which "insist[ed] on her subjection in order to establish the boundaries of worth and value in *TWD* world order" (265). Johnson argues that fans' "dismissive, and sometimes hostile, responses" to racial and gendered discourse are "in part due to the continued circulation and reiteration of white hegemony" (265), propagating "antiblack sentiment within seemingly neutral contexts" (268). As a result, "the refusal to engage questions of race and gender within this fandom community gestures towards the implicit acceptance of the nonontology of black subjects" (268). This is not to say that Black fans are not welcome to enter this online space and engage in discussions; however, they may do so only at the expense of negating, neutralizing, and nullifying their intersectional analyses of race and gender. Therefore, because whiteness is deracialized and is seen instead as the norm (Dyer 1997; Bucholtz 2001), Black fans must display a degree of passivity and identity repression (Young 2014).

[2.5] As Johnson's research demonstrates, despite *TWD*'s amassing a huge fan following (Jenkins 2013; Hassler-Forest 2014), Black audiences question *TWD*'s racial representations (Nyong'o 2012; Steiger 2011; Johnson 2015) while still engaging with its story world and characters (Jowett and Abbott 2013). Academics may focus on and thus validate certain aspects of *TWD* (Brown 2001; Calbreath-Frasieur 2015), but fans can explore, authenticate, and/or challenge other elements. Hills highlights how "for some fan audiences... elevating 'homoerotic subtext,' or 'not-so-subtext,' to the status of narrative focus means selecting out one thread of polysemic textual material for communal and discursive prioritisation" (2015, 153). With *TWD*, many Black audiences find the show problematic because of its recurring centering of white male lead characters at the perceived expense of marginalized Black male secondary characters. These antifan arguments show close engagement with the series, but they are also framed by wider civic issues around the mistreatment of Black and ethnic minorities in North America by patriarchal institutions such as the police and armed forces.

[2.6] The cultural context is that of audiences' own subject in process, whereby their racial/antifan self-identity is performed by means of responses to textual representations (Steele 2018). Online Black audiences' posts, to which I now turn, thus demonstrate heightened ideological and thematic readings of *TWD*'s characters of color, providing the schema by which the series may be critiqued. In what follows, because at the time of writing all sources were public and on open platforms, consent to quote was not deemed necessary (Bore and Hickman 2013). However, I have anonymized all posters' details in order to minimize "intrusion into the fan community" (Bore and Hickman 2013).

[2.7] On the website Nerds of Color (<https://thenerdsofcolor.org/>), self-described as a "community of fans who love superheroes, sci-fi, fantasy and video games but are not afraid to look at nerd/geek fandom with a culturally critical eye," racial depictions are frequently debated. On this site, one poster argues that *TWD* "isn't just a great comic book, it's a revolutionary comic book; one that fundamentally altered the zombie landscape and helped usher in the zombie Golden Age of today." Yet despite these words of praise, posters also critique the series, particularly *TWD*'s reductive characterization of Black men and the show's "repeated inability to depict more...[than] one ass-kicking Black man at a time." As one fan writes,

[2.8] After three seasons...[a] weird pattern borders on the comedic cliché and show in-joke: a central Black male character can only be introduced if the show's previous Black man is bumped off, a pattern I (and others) have dubbed the "One Black Man at a Time" rule. The Rule has come into effect no less than three times over the course of *TWD*.

[2.9] Discursive prioritization of racial subtexts sees *TWD* bestowing Black male characters with limited agency and representation (Deggans 2012). One fan notes, "In the TV show there is a running joke of how 'There can be only one' black man, after T-Dog gets written out and replaced by the black prisoner." In addition, criticism has also been aimed at the show's shuffling zombie hordes for lacking ethnic minority walkers (Cunningham 2010).

[2.10] One blogger laments, "My relationship with this show is over. I wanted to love it, but it kept telling me by virtue of its depiction of Black men, I wasn't its 'target' audience. I am a Black man who does not see himself represented well, if at all, on this show." Such declarations offer a response where identification is refuted (Brown 2001), but they highlight ongoing relationships where fans attempt to stick it out, watching the series in the hope that Black male characterization develops. This antifan response has developed over the course of the series. Issues of Black masculinity and representation are also crucial for this audience member:

[2.11] The message such shows promote is a toxic one; serve and remain subservient, don't aspire, consume, follow, protect assets that are not your own...I am not confused about the role of Black men in American society for the last four hundred years. We have no role. And I recognize television will reinforce this perspective as long as people of color are not allowed to write on television, to create new media which is more accurately representative of how we think, feel and behave.

[2.12] The audience's response not only addresses "the legacy of black representation in American media, the ideology of the producers, and American social realities" (Acham 2013, 103) but also subverts the "author function" (Jenkins 2013, 375) of Robert Kirkman, the cocreator (with Dave Erickson) of the comic book version of *TWD* (Image Comics, 2003). Antifans criticize the show's creators as white men who are hegemonic in the industry—and unable to create strong Black male characters. Similarly, noting diegetic racial commentary by T-Dog (Ironie Singleton), who discusses his precarious position as a sole Black man in season 2, only for this rhetoric to be blamed on his semiconscious state, a blogger explains, "It is in that moment that, as viewers of color, we are reminded that white dudes are writing this, because despite T-Dog's realization being very much in line with the world we know, on TV such a notion can only be the product of temporary dementia."

[2.13] Another fan remarks, "For all its strengths, the social dynamics on *The Walking Dead* replicate many problems from modern society. These issues of power are not thoughtfully explored and it seems a missed opportunity for an otherwise expertly crafted show." In noting how the postapocalyptic space could subvert the ongoing race relations in the United States that are divided by what Du Bois ([1903] 1994) termed the color line—that is, the line that empowers hegemonic white culture and concurrently exploits people of color

—*TWD* is read as mirroring disempowered ethnic minorities in real-world North American culture and its long-standing legacy of systemic oppression (Weinbaum 2001; Karenga 2003; Steele 2016). Furthermore, fans were unhappy with the killing of Tyreese (Chad Coleman), a Black man, in season 5, during Black History Month, using hashtag combinations such as #TheWalkingDead, #racist, and/or #BlackHistoryMonth to engage with the topic on Twitter (Steele 2018). Conversely, the same context of Black History Month was used to champion the text when Rick and Michonne's interracial romantic relationship developed in season 6. These discursive reading strategies are bolstered by wider racial and civic rhetoric embedded within heightened race relations in the United States. As fans note:

[2.14] Rick and Michonne is important for #BlackHistoryMonth.

[2.15] Rick and Michonne are closing out #BlackHistoryMonth properly.

[2.16] Michonne and Rick finally kissed during #BlackHistoryMonth I see you @WalkingDead_AMC.

[2.17] Additionally, when the quota of a single Black man is undermined when both Morgan Jones (Lennie James) and Ezekiel (Khary Payton) are present in series 7, racial discursive prioritization manifests on Twitter that reflects and/or refracts previous criticisms, often framed within wider sociopolitical discourse. Some fans praise Morgan's longevity and strength:

[2.18] My grandma always had a pic of Jesus and MLK on her wall. Imma have Black Panther and Morgan from The Walking Dead.

[2.19] Morgan is like the Obama of the walking dead "the first black guy to make it this long."

[2.20] I'm just glad Morgan is on the way to maintain the maximum black guy count of 2 on walking dead.

[2.21] However, other Black audience members find Morgan's masculinity and psychological state problematic, reading it as emblematic of wider racial stereotyping:

[2.22] Morgan's portrayal as raging savage/super-violent black man made me uncomfortable cuz that's a dangerous idea ppl have IRL [in real life].

[2.23] Morgan's crazed grief has a lot to do with the ethnicity of black masculinity...Morgan's physical displays of grief over his family lasted longer than any other male character. His self-deprecation is incredibly intense...The self-deprecating nature of the black characters in Walking Dead is fascinating and incredibly relatable...I hate that Morgan was placed in a cage. I hate that symbolism...That it is seemingly required for a black man to be incarcerated in order to be rehabilitated is not...good or inspiring.

[2.24] Comparatively, Black fans see Ezekiel's introduction and character development as potentially challenging *TWD*'s representation of Black masculinity, although by the very nature of his being Black, they are worried that he is going to die:

[2.25] Still can't get over the weak portrayal of Black Men on The Walking Dead season after season. King Ezekiel is the best example of them all.

[2.26] Hoping we finally get a strong black male character with the arrival of King Ezekiel in season 7 of the Walking Dead.

[2.27] Did The Walking Dead just give me some Black History Month from Martin Luther King. King Ezekiel is spitting right now!

[2.28] I wonder which black character the walking dead is gonna kill off next? Probably king Ezekiel.

[2.29] Black audiences bring race to the fore in their reading strategies of *TWD*. Online posts' discursive prioritization evidence a "'politics of viewing'...whereby individuals collectively engage in 'a critical politics'" while simultaneously "grappling with the pleasures of media consumption" and "concerns over potential influences of representations" (Chatman 2017, 300). In doing so, these (anti)fans recenter the text to focus on Black exploitation and Black experiences, "critiquing [wider] oppressive systems" and making "everyday discourse...a political strategy" (Steele 2016, 4). As a result, counterpublics form whereby marginalized individuals and communities respond "to misrepresentation in the mainstream media...utilizing new [media] strategies" (Steele 2018, 114–15). Such representations are culturally contextualized; reading schemas intersect with racial identity and wider cultural contextualization (Scodari 2011).

[2.30] However, it is important to note that *TWD* is part of a transmedia franchise. Within this expansive transmedia network, "what can be counted as 'text' and 'paratext' is potentially destabilized" (Hills 2012, 38). Audiences negotiate the Walking Dead's story world according to which texts they consume, and in what order. Such instability in patterns of consumption means that each textual iteration subtly alters "the horizons of meaning" (Bennett and Woollacott 1987, 19) of the wider textual corpus. I turn next to consider the Walking Dead's transmedia "malleability" (19) through other textual iterations—*FTWD* and *TTWD*—in order to highlight fans' modular and ongoing intratextual race readings.

3. New texts, old monsters: *FTWD*, *TTWD*, and the Black male body

[3.1] Like *TWD*, *FTWD* offers a multicultural cast of characters, resulting in journalistic pieces and online fans' discursive prioritization that read the spin-off show's depictions of Black masculinity as problematic. The systematic deaths of Black men resonate with the real-world treatment of the Black body as other, thus hinting at strong political subtexts (Kelly 2015; Nededog 2015). One Black antifan argues, in light of the 2014 Ferguson, Missouri, protests, "We—people of color, and black people in particular—are this country's zombies. We are the horrifying shadow suburbia is afraid will slip through the window at night. We are the reason for the US history of stockpiling guns, dating back to fears of slave rebellions." Here the antifan sees the propagation of the United States' white middle-class "civilized" mythology to be extended by controlling and expunging the poor, abject Black community (Wynter 1992; Weinbaum 2001). By focusing on racial fears, Black monstrosity "serve[s] to obscure the position of prestige, power, privilege, opportunity and supremacy associated with the very idea of whiteness" (Ulysse 2017, 147).

[3.2] Thus, whereas the marginality of the Black self in *TWD* elicits criticism from audiences, *FTWD*'s problematic depictions reside in its othering of the Black body. This is not to essentialize racial identity but rather to consider how wider cultural events become common reference points for challenging representations within the series (Steele 2016, 5). A fan notes of *FTWD*,

[3.3] The first character killed off was black. Not just black—but a black drug dealer. And a weak black drug dealer who is fought off by his jonesing white client...From the very start, the show has introduced an ineffectual black thug as the first zombie to die. A thug's black body laid out on the street (As a culture, that's how we like men's black bodies: laid out dead on the street).

[3.4] While acknowledging the series' multicultural cast, antifans argue that this comes at the cost of subordinating Black masculinity, with Black identity read as a cultural problem. These audiences thus reveal their double consciousness, their "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others... measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (Du Bois [1903] 1994, 2; see Saldanha 2006). In doing so, they acknowledge "the hegemony of Whiteness without privileging it over the agency and spiritual energy found within the Black community" (Brock 2012, 532).

[3.5] By using the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag in their discussions of *FTWD*, antifans discursively link wider civic issues with problematic depictions of race in television (Kuo 2016). Signs and symbols from political campaigns spill into their textual analysis, with subsequent fan/civic engagement revolving around related issues. Other antifans concur, referring to the stereotypical treatment of Black characters that comes with the horror genre as a reason for quitting the series. Likewise, other fans ask, "With the current sociopolitical climate, do we really need to see police brutality and racial tropes become part of a zombie plotline?" *FTWD* fictionalizes police brutality, but its resonance with real-world events is deemed insensitive by critics rather than a mode of political engagement.

[3.6] Points of contention are largely intratextually informed by affective responses to the racial dynamics of *TWD* (Robinson 2015). Such affective responses indicate that audiences strongly react to textual representations, but they also show how ongoing relationships with fictional representations can intersect with wider cultural expressions (Tenenboim-Weinblatt 2009). Critical engagement with racial politics is mapped onto topics such as the treatment of Black men in wider society, traditional depictions of Black masculinity, the marginalization of ethnic minorities, and the thoughtless power of hegemonic media industries, thus resulting in a civic awareness that challenges the Walking Dead's story world (Van Zoonen 2005; Steele 2018). Black audiences' discursive prioritization challenges Black characterization (or lack thereof) in *TWD* and *FTWD*, albeit in different ways. However, other Walking Dead texts, and fans' relationships with them, illustrate that the racial discourse attached to the franchise is not monolithic. I turn now to an analysis of the Walking Dead franchise's video game, *TTTWD*.

[3.7] *TTTWD* offers brand/franchise consistency by means of episodic structuring, an ensemble cast, complex narratives, and moral ambiguity (Hassler-Forest 2014). Yet by playing as Lee, a Black man, players can reconsider and recast postracial criticisms of *TWD*'s ethnic marginalization since players are given limited agency over Lee's characterization and his reactions to events.

[3.8] On the TellTale community forum, intersectional identity and racial politics are played out in a number of ways. Significantly, racial representations within *TTTWD* are strong narrative loci within discussions, in threads such as, "What if Lee was white?," "Why most of the characters in the game are Caucasian?," and "Was Clem African-American?," as well as wider cultural debates about race and gender featuring in threads such as "Racism in America," "Excuses for racism," "Race and racism," and "Transgender and transrace." Fans frequently post on both diegetic and cultural race relations, with arguments from one often informing the other. Arguments often circle around marginalized characters and players, the need for greater racial/cultural diversification in media, and postracial debates that reject race as an issue. Many players who identify as Black champion the character of Lee, seeing both his visibility and the ludic dimensions of his character development as markers of quality that are notably absent from the television series:

[3.9] With Lee, the game broke so many unfortunate traditions in gaming. And with the Walking Dead in general. After that travesty that was T-Dog's character, I was glad to have Lee.

[3.10] He's black but the whole narrative isn't focused on "the black experience"...There is the urban joke at the farm...the implication is that Lee constantly has to deal with little prejudices that are inevitably frustrating.

[3.11] There's a real surfeit of white, male 20–30 something male protagonist in games, because that's the demographic most developers aim for. The principle behind concepts like "affirmative action" is to be a correcting course against those tendencies...Race *is* an issue.

[3.12] Lee subverts hegemonic identities in video games and television (Brown 2001; Jansz and Martis 2007), yet he is also read as a civic device for affirmative action. His characterization raises wider cultural issues. This shifts Lee from being a marker of quality to a political symbol highlighting the absent Black body in *TWD*. Conversely, for some, Lee's racial representation reinforces racist stereotypes. One fan notes, "Lee starts out in the back of a cop car after murdering his wife's lover, and a lot of the options you have as you play Lee don't cast him in a positive light."

[3.13] Because of his representational complexity, Lee slips between subverting and harboring racist stereotypes. Additionally, as has been similarly noted in previous studies of online fandoms (Scodari 1998), fans of color on the forum are frequently compelled to demarcate, and thus perform, their racial identity—an act that often leads them to further justify their responses to the game. Interestingly, some white fans commend the characterization and emotional depth afforded to Lee, yet by acknowledging their whiteness, they seek to insulate themselves from further debate:

[3.14] Lee is extremely nuanced and that's what's great about his character, but I feel uncomfortable saying more because...I'm white and I don't think it's really my place to say if his representation was negative or not.

[3.15] The one and only time I thought about Lee's skin colour during the game was Kenny's comment about picking the lock. Other than that, it's mostly just people talking about it on

forums. Maybe it's because I'm white, I don't really care about Lee being black. I understand why people do though.

[3.16] Guys, skin color/gender/ability might not matter to YOU, when YOU see people who look like you all the time, but it does matter to lots of other people. I'll admit that I probably can't understand even close to entirely because I'm white what it's like to try to find positive media as a person of color, but I am a minority in at least two other ways that impact my life on a daily basis.

[3.17] Often these debates result in intrafandom conflict. Despite the recognition of Black marginality, the need for greater visibility, and more positive representations, some fans attempt to racially depoliticize Lee:

[3.18] So in order to relate to a character he has to be the same race as you? I am white and could totally relate to Lee.

[3.19] I don't see what race has to do with it. Personally, three of my favorite survival horror... main characters are black—and I'm not. A good character is a good character, doesn't matter what they look like.

[3.20] I think it would be cool to see less white adult males as the main protagonist in Video Games, but I really don't care that much. If it's a good character it doesn't matter the race.

[3.21] For some, the speculative dystopian fictions comprising the Walking Dead franchise are postracial: their texts offer enough of a departure from the real world that *TTTWD* does not or cannot engage with contemporary cultural politics or issues. Resonating with Johnson's (2015) research, criticism is aimed at those who read the game through a civic discourse, with politicized responses being dismissed as overly emotive. Conversely, those who focus on the franchise's racial representations reject depoliticizing interpretations. They read *TTTWD*'s narrative and characterizations as problematizing the transmedial hyperdiegesis—there is a lack of Black survivors in a largely Black and ethnically diverse part of the United States, and a reductive depiction of Black masculinity—and wider cultural representations, given the fact that Lee, as a Black male lead character, does not reflect the large-scale marginalization of such bodies within North American media. For instance, as a university lecturer, he subverts the traditional hypermasculine depictions of Black masculinity that have led to cultural fears and systematic othering (Brown 2001).

[3.22] Posts both politicize and depoliticize Lee, often in relation to posters' own senses of racial identity. However, this is not a simple racial dichotomy of Black players' politicization and white players' race refusal. Some Black fans note that they do not necessarily read race into the game; instead, they value the quality of the storytelling (Brown 2001). Likewise, to only speak of Black and white fans is to neglect other forms of identity that shape players' affective engagements with the text and the gamer/fan community (Brown 2001). One thread asks, "Would you like to see more races, ethnic groups and nationalities?" and included transcultural responses asking for Irish, Latinx, Australasian, and Asian characters, all debated in relation to the diegetic Southern US geography. This evidences how audiences negotiate *TTTWD* at individual, textual, fan-cultural, and transcultural levels. Discourses of nationality are consequently negotiated here by audience interactions with one another and with the fan object.

[3.23] Evidently, myriad points of affective engagement are informed by individuals' race and culture within fans' performance of self-identity, with the potential for multiple and/or fragmentary moments of character identification. Fans can frame the game through wider cultural politics that resonate with their real-world identity; they can also reject such politicizing stances, drawing on other aspects of personal identity and shaping how they play the game. This is often done by elevating certain reading frameworks, such as race. However, in considering how audiences can traverse *TWD*'s transmedia landscape in heterogeneous ways, I now address how paths of textual consumption can affect discursive prioritization and audience readings.

4. Accounting for heterogeneous discursive prioritization: Ergodic pathways and semiotic sequencing

[4.1] The data show that online Black audiences frequently activate discursive prioritization that reads and responds to the Walking Dead's story world within racial contexts. Ryan (2013) defines story worlds as the

static component preceding "a dynamic component that captures...unfolding events"; vitally, "some components are optional" (364). The Walking Dead has "one-world/many-texts," where transmedia "extends the scope of the original storyworld by adding more existents to it, by having secondary characters turn into heroes of the story, and by prolonging the time covered by the original story through prequels and sequels" (365–66). Significantly, though, optional transmedia narratives running parallel to and/or overlapping with the TV series offer new characters and develop established ones "without damaging the integrity of the show" (379) or punishing audience members who do not wish to engage in these avenues of story world expansion (Ecenbarger 2014).

[4.2] Therefore, "the meaning of...[the Walking Dead] is constantly being constructed" on the basis of "previous understanding of other texts" (Ecenbarger 2014, 3). Indeed, "each incarnation can develop its own audience without having to rely on any previous familiarity with other versions" (Hassler-Forest 2016, 162). Moreover, it cannot be assumed there is a universal Walking Dead parent text, with every other iteration being simply paratextual. Because each iteration is a "textual shifter" (Bennett and Woollacott 1987, 234), differences among transmedia texts can reinforce and/or subvert readings (Fischer 2011). Consequently, although the data indicate that racial identity informs discursive reading schemas that may be mapped against wider cultural contexts that intersect with Black US audiences' lived experiences (Steele 2016), the data also present heterogeneous responses to the Walking Dead franchise, depending on which text is the focus. The remainder of this essay conceptualizes this to better serve myriad Black audiences and their readings. To do so, I return to *TTTWD*, but not its textual representations. Rather, I address its structural qualities.

[4.3] In stressing the choices that players must make, *TTTWD* presents a "multicursal narrative structure," with cursality defined as "the realisation...that there are multiple paths through the narrative in addition to the one...[players] are currently following" (Goodbrey 2015, 65). Semiotic sequencing by "selective movement" provides an "ergodic" structuring, with "each decision...mak[ing] some parts of the text more, and others less, accessible, and you may never know the exact results of your choices; that is, exactly what you missed" (Aarseth 1997, 1, 3). The game itself trades on such relationships by presenting different choices and trajectories through the narrative. Affect is thereby founded on "the dual domain of the semiotic and the procedural" (Sicart 2013, 47). How the text is coded and the process by which a narrative develops together provide the affective grid from which readers will make meaning.

[4.4] Ergodic dynamics, although fundamental to the medium specificity of *TTTWD*, can be applied to the wider Walking Dead transmedia matrix (Franco 2015). This is because "the different ways in which the reader is invited to 'complete' a text" allow for multiple "plausible interpretation[s]" (Aarseth 1997, 20, 51). Klastrup and Tosca note of fans' networked transmedia consumption: "Experience is always informed by experiences in the past: in this case...prior engagements with the cultural product and interactions with others around this product. In sum...the cultural and aesthetic experience of transmedia objects is not fixed but in flux," with the result that "user engagement with transmedia worlds...[can recapture] particular experiences over and over again" (2016, 108–9). Thus, certain ergodic pathways and semiotic sequencing can strengthen an individual's discursive prioritization. This is evident with those fans who see *FTWD* as reinforcing *TWD*'s mistreatment of Black male characters.

[4.5] Conversely, as evidenced by *TTTWD*, texts both on their own and as part of an intratextual matrix can offer new experiences that challenge existing readings of the franchise's story world. The data from the TellTale forum indicate that many players had not consumed any other *TWD* texts (Ecenbarger 2014). Yet the data also show a Black fan may move from finding the representational/ideological framework of Black masculinity in *TWD*'s T-Dog problematic to celebrating the nuanced and developed characterization of Lee in *TTTWD*. Therefore, alternative ergodic pathways, although still stressing a racial prioritization in the individual's reading of the Walking Dead franchise, permit the fan to present a more negotiated consideration of the various representations of Black masculinity within the realm of textual experience.

[4.6] Likewise, affect forms through the symbiotic relationship between the semiotic and the procedural. This may be extrapolated to the phenomenological procedure of wider experiences that shape audiences' readings. This accounts for the processes of consuming intratextual objects. As narratives proceed, whether by single episode, level, chapter, film, or serialized (trans)media narrative, the procedural component feeds into semiotic frameworks of the text. It also allows these to intersect with the procedural nature of ongoing lived cultural experiences (Schlesinger et al. 1992)—in this instance, race relations. Consuming new texts and gaining new lived experiences operates alongside the movement of culture. This may be seen in how

audiences assess Black masculinity in *TWD* as problematic through its passive role in relation to hegemonic white male heroes. Racial discourse shifts when audiences read the zombification of Black men in *FTWD* as reflective of wider cultural othering. The relationship between textual and cultural experiences accounts for individual and collective responses. Yet we can also note that there has been little criticism aimed at *TWD* over other racial or cultural depictions such as Korean, Latinx, or Maori. Such politicized and depoliticized bodies attest that what "one community sees as political, another may declare to be apolitical" (Jenkins and Shresthova 2016, 283). Thus, although serial television might reward consumers for transmedia and/or repeat consumption, audience identity also informs the (repeat) motifs read in the mediated texts.

5. Conclusion

[5.1] Across all three Walking Dead texts, race is a discursive prioritization for many Black audience members, bringing characters of color to the fore in reading TV and transmedia narratives by evaluating the story world and those who dwell within it against their own experiences. For these audiences, the Black male body is "a moving point of reference" (Bennett and Woollacott 1987, 44) that, as the locus of discursive prioritization, refracts or reflects *TWD*'s quality status. As an online and cultural nexus, audience voices can overlap, harmonize, or diverge from each other to varying degrees. Nevertheless, individuals write and perform their own racial identity online through their relationship with the Walking Dead and its representations, providing a strong oppositional counterpoint to the dominant culture (Steele 2016; 2018). While the data indicate how *TWD* and *FTWD* are read as texts representative of the legitimization of "racial hierarchies existent in US society" (Yuen 2017, 7), *TTTWD* is championed for subverting these hierarchies. Evidently it is not only trained academics who can undertake ideological readings of texts. Audiences too can focus on thematic deconstruction of texts, especially when lived identity has also been politicized. As I have indicated, "posts on non-political...websites" and social media platforms "may serve as political forums" (Steele 2018, 113). During times of wider political unrest, Black audiences favor ideological responses because such responses seem to be appropriate (Schlesinger et al. 1992). In-process phenomenological, cultural, and transmedia contexts play salient roles in shaping the intersectional politicization of (anti)fans and their readings.

[5.2] By extrapolating ergodic and semiotic sequencing, I am able to account for distinct readings of different *TWD* texts in relation to race; further, by tracing the paths of consumption, readings can transmogrify, reinforce, and/or refract, depending on which texts are experienced. We could also explore other audiences' ergodic pathways and semiotic sequencing; they may exhibit other discursive prioritization. For example, fans might wish to analyze the role of women in the Walking Dead franchise, such as Clementine, Michonne, and Lily (Abbott 2016). In considering a wider application of ergodic pathways and semiotic sequencing, the research has sought to better serve audiences of color. As a field, fan studies seems to have taken a particular ergodic path, selecting and examining particular sites, practices, and identities (Aarseth 1997), while other aspects, such as race, have been left more in the dark (Wanzo 2015; Booth 2016).

[5.3] Although I have stressed the need to address the relationships of audiences of color with popular culture, it is also salient to note that I have solely focused on the written texts of Black audiences' engagement with the Walking Dead franchise on blogs, forums, and Twitter. However, these are not the only sites or media texts that fans use to respond to the texts comprising the franchise. Engagement with the Walking Dead's representations of race is also manifest in YouTube vlogs as well as a plethora of memes. Although the scope of this essay does not permit me to explore these texts, they highlight the volume of racially inflected readings by audiences of color speaking out against texts they find representationally problematic, and they thus serve to illustrate a salient area of audience research that scholars in the fields of both fan studies and horror studies ought to pay further attention to.

6. Notes

1. Like ethnography, netnography as a method "studies complex cultural practices in action, drawing attention to a multitude of grounded and abstract ideas, meanings, social practices, relationships, languages, and symbol systems" (Kozinets 2010, 25). It does so by analyzing "the human element of online human and technological interaction, social interaction and experience" (243).

2. I use the Walking Dead to denote the transmedia franchise and *TWD* to denote the TV series *The Walking Dead*.

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