

Homeland Insecurities: *The Walking Dead* and the Purgatory of Captivity on the Post-Apocalyptic Frontier

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Introduction

Frontier mythology pervades the American national narrative and has historically cast corporate and imperial interests as a fantasy of rugged, masculine individualists fighting for the establishment of white civilization against ‘savage’, dark ‘heathens’, unregulated freedom to consume natural resources, and the imagined manifest destiny of global military dominance. As the guiding mythos behind the European conquest of the United States, the notion of the frontier, in historian Richard Slotkin’s terms, ‘regenerates’ mythic American exceptionalism and national identity ‘through violence’ as it justifies military invasions of ‘darker’ places both at home and around the globe (1973). Frontier mythology has informed American literature and popular culture since the conquest’s beginning. From sermons about captivity with ‘savage’ natives to dime novels, Hollywood westerns and television series, this mythos has been central to American national identity. The television series *The Walking Dead* (AMC, 2010–) allows for a sustained vivisection of frontier mythology within the generic conventions of a zombie apocalypse. Evoking and then ironizing US frontier mythology and its racial and gendered themes, the show’s protagonists attempt to generate and regenerate states of security via unmitigated violence and survivalist tactics against ever-encroaching zombie hordes and increasingly destructive survivor groups. This essay contends that the show’s development of the Captivity Narrative—historically rooted in the Puritanical attraction to and fear of the Other—amid the metaphor of the zombie apocalypse functions as an allegory of our colonial past and

pandemically present selves: a post-9/11 United States that has become increasingly tribalistic in the surreal era of a reality TV show host's celebrity presidency. It focuses primarily on how season seven of *The Walking Dead* relies on recycling frontier mythology's captivity narrative as rival communities deploy captivity and torture against others and/or attempt to assimilate them. Mirroring this endless cycle, the structure of the seasons and frequent mid-season breaks repurpose the cliffhanger by metaphorically holding *The Walking Dead* viewers hostage to the repeatedly shutdown and longhaul fates of their favorite and most hated characters over and over again.

Since the early twentieth century, zombies have been a powerful index of fears and anxieties during periods of global unrest. As metaphors of fates worse than death, zombies have long allegorized expendable lives. In 2008, Annalee Newitz charted 'How War and Social Upheaval Cause Spikes in Zombie Movie Production' for the website *i09*. The line graph maps spikes in zombie film output, aligned with global events such as the Great Depression, World War II, the launch of Sputnik, US anti-war protests, and the Iraq War, which rides the highest spike (Newitz 2008). The most recent zombie zeitgeist was ushered in by the impact of, and the United States' reactions to, the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and continues to thrive in myriad forms in the age of Trump. The proliferation of zombie output includes film, television, books, gaming, zombie walks, and *The Walking Dead* (Hereafter *TWD*) television series, as well as its spinoff series, video games, and other merchandise. While Newitz ends her chart description with the question, 'Is there a causal connection, or is it just coincidence?' (2008), it is not difficult to see that zombie culture has spread virally amid the culture of fear that has pervaded US society in the wake of the terrorist attacks. Thus, zombies have continued to flourish in an era of increasing uncertainty, refugee camps at the U.S.- Mexican border, redistribution of wealth to the top one

percent, ever-intensifying natural disasters and weather events, and, most recently, a global pandemic.

As I have written elsewhere, since zombies have long served as malleable metaphors for social anxieties and perceived existential threats; zombies are perfect for allegorizing how empires imagine their own destruction through popular culture (Froula 2010). Within their rotting frames, they bear the horrific secrets of how empires build themselves on the backs of the disenfranchised. Zombie culture has expanded exponentially in the era of endless wars, food insecurity, climate change, drone warfare and surveillance, global financial crises and concomitant austerity measures, intensified privatization of public resources, and the erosion of social institutions. *TWD* nods to increasingly stronger weather events in season nine when the survivor communities must rebuild bridges in the wake of being flooded out and when a blizzard threatens their survival. Richard Rys (2018) notes that by season nine, characters are naming the dangerous herds of zombies ‘like major storms’; such naming further situates the zombie herds as lethal features of the environment. As I will discuss later, zombies, known in *TWD* as ‘walkers’, are constant reminders of not only fates worse than death but also endless captivity in one’s own suffering, decaying form.¹

The Limits of Mythology for Failed States

The Walking Dead opens in the ruins of a failed United States where the promises of upward mobility and belief in American Exceptionalism have crumbled. All government and commercial institutions have fallen, their remnants to be scavenged for nonperishable food, drinking water, weapons, ammunition, and shelter. The detritus of middle- and upper-class materialism haunt the

mise-en-scene of the show, seeming to mock the survivors with its utter uselessness in this new reality. Initial broadcasts and promises of safety in shelters and military bases end before survivors can reach them. Early seasons inverted the logic of ‘Manifest Destiny’ through conquest, rendering each attempt at an Edenic civilization a bloody failure, from the RV camp, to the Center for Disease Control, to a mostly abandoned prison. Rather than march westward in conquest of a limitless expanse of land and riches, the survivors initially roamed in circles, hoping to cage themselves in protective custody from both their undead and alive other selves—that is, from other rival bands of survivors. As Nicholas Beuret and Gareth Brown note, ‘Survivors exist in a world without frontiers or new territories to expand into. It is a world saturated with waste and ruins’ (2017: 337). On the domestic front, the mythology of rugged individualism gives way to tribal groups warring over shrinking resources on the ever-encroaching brink of extinction. In later seasons, sustainable chiefdoms emerge with their own philosophies, codes and conduct, and means of survival against violence from the undead as well as the living, and outsiders are always met with suspicion and, often, pre-emptive imprisonment.

Frontier mythology views American history as a series of conflicts between Euro-Americans and indigenous ‘savages’ at the ever-westward frontier between an inevitable American civilization and ‘virgin land’. *The Walking Dead* views our contemporary moment as a series of conflicts between familiar protagonists and initially unfamiliar adversaries trying to kill each other until the ammunition runs out. As communities put down roots both figuratively and literally, they build gardens and walls to keep out walkers and other threats. Strangers are considered hostile until proven otherwise and are often treated as captives, frequently detained in a cell or handcuffed for security before being allowed to participate in the host community’s initiation rituals.

Scholars have noted the invocation of the frontier in *TWD* since the series' opening episode, which reveals the remnants of the 7th Cavalry helicopter unit outside the abandoned hospital where protagonist Rick Grimes (Andrew Lincoln) awakens alone from a coma. Shelley Rees described the first and second seasons of the show as 'a grotesque hybrid, a changeling Western' that 'disempowers its heroes, creates child monsters from its child victims, and turns sheriffs bound to protect children and avenge harm done to them into their grim killers' (2012: 81). Gerry Canavan has written about how the comics employ the 'cowboy or frontier imaginary' in 'a bizarre postmodern pastiche of the history of US imperialism, as different moments of its empire collide into a single simultaneous instant in the face of an essentially inimical and totally implacable racialized threat' (2010: 442). More recently, Amanda Keeler (2018) reads the series through Slotkin's notion of the 'post-frontier' in its inversion of frontier mythology (Slotkin 1992: 635) and as an example of John Cawelti's 'post-Western', which sets 'Western symbolism and themes [in] contemporary or urban or futuristic settings' (Cawelti 1999: 103–104; Keeler 2018). These authors deftly outline how frontier mythology and western iconography saturate the series, especially in its earlier seasons.²

Captives, Audiences, and Captive Audiences

Following the well-established path of frontier/western scholarship on *TWD*, this essay will focus on the use of the captivity narrative device from season seven on, after many viewers gave up the ghost and saw viewing figures decline. The theme of captivity works within the show on the viewer in multiple ways. First, as I explain below, captivity narratives stem from Puritan fear of the Other and concern anxiety toward encounters with an unfamiliar, often dehumanized

group. More broadly, the theme of captivity figures in the undead zombies who are hostage both to their ravenous appetites and to the torture of their own decaying forms. But so too are the show's viewers living in the zombified apocalyptic purgatory. Also, *The Walking Dead* narratively holds its viewers captive to suspenseful mid-season and seasonal breaks, which both tantalize and frustrate the show's fans.

Nevertheless, many fans broke free of the show's hold after the first episode of season seven ('Meet the New Boss'). For them, the opening episode opened with too heavy a betrayal to keep them watching in what Katherine Sugg describes as 'an apparently doomed, serial narrative loop' (2015, 793) While the hype to see the show's debut of the legendary comics villain Negan excited fans, his immediate elimination of Abraham (Michael Cudlitz) and fan favorite Glenn (Steven Yeun) angered a large segment of the audience who, in response, quit watching the show (Caulfield, 2018). According to Al Caulfield:

The Verge's weekly column '*The Walking Dead's* Quitters' Club,' which bet on the likelihood of its two writers never watching the show again, closed up shop for good after Negan's literal double whammy. Fans cried out on social media that their hearts had been broken, critics claimed Negan was 'ruining' *The Walking Dead*, and viewership dropped from 17 million in the Negan-focused season seven premiere to 10.4 million just a month later. (Looper.com: 2018)

Other complaints included seeing long-standing characters 'beaten down', the manipulation of fans' emotions by making them believe zombies had consumed Glenn several episodes before Negan killed him for good, and the frustration effect of metaphorically being held captive, again and again, waiting out the recurring mid-season series hiatus for the second half of later seasons to begin.

AMC president Sarah Barnett acknowledges that the timing of Negan's first season, which began in late October 2016 did not help ratings (Rowles, 2020). More explicitly, Sam Adams writes:

Negan's highly sexualized form of brutal domination strikes a particularly ugly chord in the midst of a presidential campaign where one candidate brags about the size of his genitalia, disparages his female opponent's 'stamina' (i.e., virility), and is accused of serial sexual assault. (Slate.com: 2016)

Additionally, in large measure, what explains my own and others' well-documented frustrations with the series, but makes seasons seven and onwards especially intriguing, is how much *TWD* relies on recycling frontier mythology's captivity theme. While zombies are always a threat, they do not constitute the 'Big Bad' of earlier seasons until season ten. Instead, they have evolved, or devolved, into appetite-driven weapons that are subject to the living's manipulation and deployment. Nor is it merely the threat of other living to kill or to turn protagonists into the undead that constitutes the most palpable danger that they face. Rather, it is captivity and torture that characters, and viewers, fear the most.

Particularly in its treatment of protagonist Sheriff Rick Grimes (Andrew Lincoln), seasons six through eight further dismantle American mythologies of rugged individualism and exceptionalism even as the show reanimates—and vexes—the tropes of the Western genre and the themes of its captivity narrative. A feature of frontier mythology, captivity narratives comprise one of America's earliest genres of writing 'since the earliest European-Native contact' (Derounian-Stodola 1998: 23). As Slotkin notes, these narratives 'constitute the first coherent myth-literature developed in America for American Audiences' (1973: 95). According to Audra Simpson, there are more than 1,200 editions containing 450–500 'first personal accounts...from

the seventeenth century to the nineteenth' (2008: 253). Kathryn Zabelle Derounian-Stodola argues, the captivity narrative's plot 'is most commonly resolved with the captive's escape, transculturation, or death' (2008: 23). While not all native tribes in North America took captives, some were motivated 'to convert captives into adopted tribal members', explains Derounian-Stodola, who would 'replace tribal members lost to war and disease' (1998, xv, xvi). Since tribes were not concerned with racial purity, 'like Euro-American settlers', adopted captives would have full status within them (Derounian-Stodola 1998, xvi). In contrast, Puritan sermons about captivity tend to circumvent the history of indigenous tribes taking men captive and instead focus on the white, female victim abducted by dark 'savages' who threaten her spirituality, civilized nature, and her sexual purity. In these accounts, the captive withstands the ordeal because of her religious faith yet provokes anxiety about how she might have changed or 'gone native'. Indeed, despite this gendered framework, captivity narratives are replete with performances of extreme violence and savagery by white women. I have written elsewhere (2006), one seventeenth-century female captive, Hannah Duston, stole hatchets from her Abenaki captors and killed four adults and six children in order to escape (Slotkin, 1973). Later, she traded their scalps for bounty (McAllister, 2005). Significantly, Puritan preacher Cotton Mather recounts this episode in a manner that celebrates Duston's brutality, suggesting that it is inspired by divinely endowed, righteous motherly love. Duston, Mather claims, was moved to maternal rage because her kidnappers had bashed her newborn's head against a tree before they carried Duston away (Weis 1998). Such manipulation of the narrative suppresses its anomalous representation of female violence and realigns it with white, Eurocentric cultural values. Multiple characters in season seven escape captivity by slaughtering their captors in analogous ways, such as when Daryl

(Norman Reedus) bludgeons a fearful Savior as he breaks out of his cell in Sanctuary ('Rock in the Road' 7:9).

I am not arguing that the postapocalyptic communities on *TWD* are surrogates for indigenous North American tribes, although Christine Heckman compellingly asserts the importance of the series' setting in the Southeast United States: 'Geography and history are crucially linked here, since the economy of the Southeast is rooted not only in the institution of slavery but also in the economic gain from moving Native Americans off the land' (2014: 99). Rather, I contend the communities of *TWD* are tribal in nature owing to their rituals of first contact, initiation into the community, and the sense of identity shared inside their walls. The primary reason *TWD* is an exemplar post-9/11 television series is because it makes sense that in America—as social, governmental, and military institutions fail—citizens would band into makeshift family units for protection and strength in numbers to compete with rival groups and to protect against the interminable threat of zombies. One only has to look at the mask-averse fringe groups that emerged in response to state lockdown orders as the pandemic wore on through summer 2020 or observe the armed nationalist militias counter-protesting Black Lives Matters protesters (Sottile 2020; Sardarizadeh and Wendling 2020). Or, one could consider the practice of hoarding toilet paper and bleached wipes during the initial disruption of the North American supply chain (Moyer, 2020; Terlep 2020). Political tribalism currently dominates American society, and, as Dawn Keetley points out, 'there is no human future without zombies' in *The Walking Dead* (2014: 7). As strangers and foes interact with different tribal groups on *TWD*, their outcomes typically fall into Derounian-Stodola's captivity categories of escape, transculturation, or death, except in the case of those who are zombified and forced into abject existence as appetite-driven wounds.

Weaponizing Bare Life

Since 2010, it has been easy for viewers to become inured to images of the fourth category of being held captive to one's own rotting flesh, capable only of brain-stem activity and aggressive chomping. In an essay comparing zombies to 'displaced people', such as 'refugees, asylum-seekers, and . . . immigrants', Jon Stratton reads zombies as being characteristic of Giorgio Agamben's notion of 'bare life' (2011: 267). Bare life is a slippery term, but it encompasses what Anthony Downey describes as:

a limbo-like state that is largely preoccupied with acquiring and sustaining the essentials of life. The refugee, the political prisoner, the disappeared, the victim of torture, the dispossessed—all have been excluded, to different degrees, from the fraternity of the social sphere, appeal to the safety net of the nation-state and recourse to international law. (2009: 109)

Stratton continues, 'Where zombies appear as a remorseless threat laying siege to wherever humans manage to collect to defend themselves, displaced people are constructed in the same way, as a threat to the border of the state' (2011: 277). For the last ten years, *TWD* has encouraged this analogy via countless scenes of zombies always attacking the borders erected by the living to protect their settlements. However, the series shifts in later seasons to an emphasis on what we might term a barren life, that is, the captive living. Negan, the model autocrat, in particular exploits the fear of death at Sanctuary, leading his kneeling laborers in the charge that 'nothing matters if you're dead' ('Sing Me a Song' 7:7). Yet, the cinematography takes pains to

reveal that perpetual torture is the fate worse than death. Sanctuary keeps zombies in a moat-like pen and forces its living prisoners to maintain the zombies in captivity as a defense against strangers and other invaders.

Sanctuary is far from being the only community that weaponizes zombies in perpetual captivity as a defensive strategy. In season two, Michonne (Danai Gurira) appears for the first time, wielding her katana and leading two jaw-less and arm-less zombies she has shackled and chained at the neck ('Beside the Dying Fire' 2:13). She later explains that these enslaved zombies have allowed her to survive on her own before meeting up with Rick's group. Enslavement of zombies to torture newcomers is a common occurrence. Upon meeting the Scavengers for the first time, Rick must prove his worth to negotiate with them before asking them to join forces against Negan ('New Best Friends' 7:10). Captivity in *TWD* often begins with a trial by combat to prove usefulness to a new group. In this initiation ritual, Jadis (Pollyanna McIntosh) shoves Rick into a trash heap for one-on-one combat against a weaponized zombie covered in spiked armor who manages to wound his hand and leg. Rick manages to save himself and put it out of its considerable misery of wearing multiple sharp, metal stakes through its torso and arms, a heavy spiked helmet that covers its eyes on its head (7:10). Highlighting the afterlife of planned obsolescence within American hyper-consumption, Rick first attempts to hit it with a computer keyboard, then fights to trap it under the mounds of garbage comprising the Heaps so he can stab it with a shard of broken glass. In season eight, Sanctuary's offense against their colonial settlements becomes more pro-active when they realize they can kill the living slowly by rubbing weapons and ammunition in the innards of zombies, turning their victims' wounds into ticking time bombs within the walls of their own settlements. Negan demonstrates this plan in a close-up of an abject, skeletal walker, still 'alive', getting repeatedly stabbed in the

guts with his barbed wire-wrapped baseball bat, readying the Savivors for their night attack on Hilltop ('The Key,' 8:12).

The captive communities who populate *The Walking Dead* in season seven exist and subsist as they do only because of Negan's colonialist whims, are: Alexandria, Sanctuary, Hilltop, The Kingdom, The Heaps, and Seaside. The show's primary protagonists live in Alexandria, a self-sustaining gated community that boasts solar power, though over the course of the season some will leave to become transculturated into Hilltop. Within the former factory of Sanctuary, Negan holds vicious sway over the Savivors and rules over the other communities, securing their goods and services with bombastic violence. Over the course of seasons six and seven, the Savivors comprise the primary antagonists, bullying Alexandria and the other settlements until their eventual integrated, coordinated rebellion that encompasses season eight. Hilltop's farms surround a former living history museum where a cowardly Gregory (Xander Berkeley) leads by capitulating to the Savivors' every whim; that is, until Maggie (Lauren Cohan) leaves Alexandria and usurps his weak leadership position. King Ezekial (Khary Payton), a former zookeeper who dabbled in community theater, rules genially over The Kingdom with his tiger Shiva and inspirational Shakespearean speeches. The Heaps consist of a vast junkyard inhabited by the mercenary Scavengers and their monosyllabic speech patterns. The enigmatic Jadis leads this community with her penchant for artfully weaponizing zombies with metal accoutrement. Only women live in Oceanside, a secretive fishing community whose male numbers were decimated by warring with the Savivors. Although captivity, particularly when different survivor groups make initial contact, has been a stable plot device of the series' earlier seasons, season seven's depiction of multiple communities captive to the fear of the Savivors' punishing violence is especially thematic.

Given human labor is so essential for a community's survival, as is the need to keep its locations protected from predators, the transculturation of a captive is often the most desirable outcome. But initial violent responses to kill, warn, or otherwise subdue newcomers to communities are common in *TWD*. For example, in season seven, an unconscious Alexandrian, Tara (Alanna Masterson), washes up on the beach of a heretofore unknown Oceanside ('Swear' 7:6). Through dialogue between Oceansiders Cyndie (Sydney Park) and Rachel (Mimi Kirkland), viewers learn that this community normally shoots strangers on sight. Sneaking into Oceanside like a military scout, Tara observes that this matriarchal society has a replete weapons cache that Alexandria could use. Upon discovery of their interloper, the Oceanside Amazons initially shoot at Tara and then hold her at gunpoint, knock her out, and handcuff her to the radiator to decide her fate. Standard questions in these moments of initial contact assess background, identity, and threat level: Where are you from, and what are you doing here? Most settlements have such rituals of initiation; Rick's group has long asked newcomers how many zombies have they killed, how many living people, and why.

Since this secret, women-only encampment intends to remain hidden from the Saviors' cruel and greedy regime, they interview their captive to discern her potential as a transculturated member of Oceanside to preserve their security from the rest of the locations. Here Tara learns that the Saviors killed every male over the age of ten, and, rather than labor for Negan, the women left their original settlement to hide in secrecy. She appeals to them to band together with Alexandria, but the matriarch refuses to fight any more and has her scouts at first physically restrain Tara from leaving, then try to kill her. With help from one resistant member of Oceanside, the Alexandrian is freed after promising not to reveal their location. Tara delays sharing the information, but eventually leads the Alexandrian militia back to

Oceanside to hold the community captive so that they can ‘borrow’ their weapons for their war against the Savivors. Such is the risk of releasing captives: the probability, if not inevitability, of them looping back with their own people to plunder essential supplies, if not worse

Failed States of Exceptionalism

In the lead-up to season seven, our protagonists, led by Rick, live rather comfortably in the settlement of Alexandria. Many seasons of tribulation and wandering have led them here to live in relative safety, enough to find trading partners in other communities, such as Hilltop. But rather than being wholly idyllic, all of the local settlements are subject to the sadistic manipulation of the rapacious robber baron, Negan, and his nefarious claims over them as sources of labor, goods, and services within his own postapocalyptic colonial empire. In his raw but eloquent cruelty, he governs through fear and violence, epitomized in his barbed wire-rapped baseball bat that he affectionally refers to as Lucille, the name of his dead wife who Negan describes as too ‘weak’ to survive (‘The Obligated’ 9:4). Negan’s power is absolute; those who have kneeled in loyalty to him also refer to themselves as ‘Negan’, thus demonstrating how far they are willing to go to remain in the cult that dominates everyone else within the Savivors’ reach.

In comparison, Rick’s over-confidence in his own small-town sheriff leadership, as well as his groups tactical skills—developed from having survived outside walls for so long—makes him an easy target for Negan’s machinations. Despite his own group’s history of killing humans whom they judged to be threatening, he still believes in his exceptionalism, that his group are the

‘good guys’, and that fighting the Savivors will keep Alexandria safe and autonomous. In season six, Rick leads his militia to massacre a satellite station outpost of Savivors in their sleep in the dead of night. ‘This is how we eat’, he tells the Alexandrians, despite the cyclical nature of violence on the apocalyptic frontier. Nevertheless, Carol (Melissa McBride), an effective abused-wife-turned-warrior who has been masquerading as a non-threatening domestic goddess to disarm Alexandria’s longer-standing residents, and a pregnant Maggie are captured by female Savivors as they wait on the perimeter during the raid (‘Not Tomorrow Yet’ 6:12).

In the subsequent episode ‘The Same Boat’, the Savior women hold their hostages in another outpost while considering Rick’s attempts to trade the surviving Savior from the satellite station for the Alexandrians (6:13). Carol and Maggie’s initiation is handled with military efficiency down to the Savivors’ call signs and the hoods they place over their prisoners’ heads. The journey to the second Savior outpost places the viewer in the captives’ subject position until their masks are removed. Ever resourceful, Carol uses a crucifix she finds to saw at the tape around her hands, but she begins to hyperventilate behind her gag. Carol’s ongoing inner conflicts with her kill count fuel her convincing ‘nervous little bird’ act. When the Savior women re-enter their cell, she prayerfully holds the crucifix and tells the Savivors that while her death would be unimportant, they shouldn’t hurt Maggie or the baby. Had Cotton Mather written a sermon about Carol, these displays of faith would have justified what happens next.

The episode is a study in interrogation and manipulation tactics as well as a revelation of how little the Alexandrians know about the strength and numbers of their enemy. Moreover, it exemplifies the way the show has remade its gender roles. As Emily Todd VanDerWerff (2016a) reminds us, ‘*The Walking Dead* used to be a series about male alpha dogs facing off, snarling and yipping at each other, while women cowered in the background’ (Vox.com 2016). Coming

on the heels of the organized slaughter we witnessed our protagonists commit in the previous episode, this episode also reveals how tenuous the line between Self and Other are. When a Savior male slaps the Savior Paula (Alicia Witt) across the face because he is enraged that Carol remains unhurt despite shooting him, captives and captors fight back together to knock him out. Another Savior snidely questions Maggie about how nice their community must be if she has the optimism to bring a new life into this post-apocalypse. She then informs Maggie that the Alexandrians ‘are not the good guys. You should know this’ which calls the exceptionalism of our protagonists into question, something Carol has already been struggling with (6:13). This moment is particularly allegorical for a nation embroiled in endless war. As Philip L. Simpson (2014) writes, in his analysis of the zombie apocalypse as a ‘symptom of the elevated social anxiety’, in this contemporary period of American history, ‘what clearer metaphor could there be for the nagging American anxiety that there is no better future waiting and that we ourselves are monsters or potential monsters?’ (Simpson 2014: 28; 38). Within this space of ambivalence, nonetheless, the Alexandrians keenly analyze their captors, sympathetically eliciting stories and turning their captors’ questions into information-gathering. Their passive behavior makes the Savivors feel comfortable to leave them alone with enough time for them to cut through the tape around their wrists and feet. Recalling Hannah Duston, Maggie insists that they kill the rest of the Savivors on their way out, setting up an ambush to burn alive the unit of Savivors on their way to help Paula. On the one hand, this deadly act begs the question of who the monsters actually are—Walkers? Savivors? Alexandrians?— if our protagonists are as willing to use scorched earth tactics against their perceived enemies, both undead and alive, as the Savivors. On the other, their decision also reflects the pervasive anxiety surrounding, and frequent outcome of, the captivity experience since the colonial period: captives will adopt the savage ways of their captors.

Negan gets his revenge for this massacre in the sixth season's final episode 'Last Day on Earth', which functions as a *Stagecoach*-esque (John Ford, 1931) narrative in which Rick drives around a camper with his militia in an attempt to find a doctor to treat a feverish Maggie at Hilltop because she appears to be miscarrying (6:16). Anticipating the Alexandrians' moves, the Saviors block the road at every turn, upping the ante each time to demonstrate their superior numbers. One roadblock of zombies chained together includes one adorned with one of Michonne's dreadlocks, another with Daryl's arrows. One decrepit zombie in particular wears chains cruelly looped through his ribcage. When Rick moves to break them free, the Saviors fire warning shots at the group. Attempting a different way to the doctor, the Alexandrians find another roadblock of logs that are set on fire as a warning after hanging a prisoner of the Saviors from the overpass above the group while they study the mountain of logs. A final attempt on foot lands them in their final destination, surrounded by the eerie signature whistles of the Saviors as well as a large army of them. They take Rick's team's weapons and assure Rick, who visibly quakes with fear, that 'the time for talking is over'.

In disbelief, the Alexandrians kneel for their initiation ritual into their captivity of capital to the Saviors. They have been claimed to spend the next season providing resources and labor for Negan, who, after spelling out his humiliating 'New World Order', punctuates his entitlement to them by beating an unknown Alexandrian to death in a spectacle of gore and dominance that carries over into the season seven opener many months later. The cinematography places the viewer into the victim's subject position, reminding the audience that we are sonically and visually captive, both to Negan's brutality as well as the narrative structure that delays knowledge of which protagonist(s) we lost, this time until next season. The season ends with the audience perspective knocked sideways on the ground, blood trickling down the camera lens.

Things are literally not looking good for either our heroes or ourselves. It is this uncomfortable captive position, which both characters and viewers must suffer through, that the later seasons seem obsessed with and in thrall to.

Negan's ritual humiliation of Rick likewise continues into the first episode of season eight by separating him from the rest of the group and tempting the sheriff to kill the sociopath with an axe ('Meet the New Boss' 8:1). As VanDerWerff (2016b) observes, the episode's flashbacks and flashforwards delayed the identification of the victims until halfway through its running time. This intentional structure, she continues, 'seemed like *The Walking Dead* was trying to get the audience to thirst for blood—to be *relieved* when Negan started hitting someone in the head with a baseball bat' (VanDerWerff 2016b). But Rick's flashbacks reveal the dangers of resisting capitulation as Daryl's futile attempt to avenge Abraham by swinging at Negan leads Negan to slowly and brutally beat Maggie's husband Glenn to death in a most gruesome, eye-popping way. Next, he claims Daryl as his own personal captive to replace labor lost at the Savior outpost massacre. Rick's complete and utterly humiliating submission before the people he led for seven seasons is further emphasized by Negan's tempting Rick to pull a Hannah Duston revenge scheme with the axe he leaves available in their time in the RV. Rick picks up the axe on command but makes no attempt to raise it against his captor because he knows the Savivors will kill the rest of his people if he comes back alone. With Negan's militia holding guns to the Alexandrians' heads, Negan demands Rick cut off the arm of his son Carl (Chandler Riggs) to prove his fealty, only to withdraw the order at the last minute—like Biblical Abraham's God—to seal his control when a blubbering Rick moves to obey, thus signaling the ultimate failure of Rick's belief system in triumphing by virtue of his own group's exceptionalism. Epitomizing the zombie genre's convention that living humans are more of a

threat than the undead, and torturous captivity is the ultimate punishment, Negan's master class in bloody conquest and dominance concludes by threatening Daryl with dismemberment and then actually imprisoning him in a cell within Sanctuary. In this episode, Negan essentially takes all of Alexandria captive by fear as well, informing them, 'You answer to me. You provide for me. You belong to me' (8:1). Negan's forced transculturation of the group effectively colonizes their labor and supplies for Sanctuary.

The choice of Daryl as prize captive is particularly significant because he harkens from frontier survivalist stock, tracking, hunting, and dressing game with his crossbow and arrows. More specifically, Daryl functions as frontier mythology's 'man who knows Indians' (Slotkin, 1973). A key heroic, mythic figure—from Leatherstocking, Daniel Boone, Davey Crockett and onward to the Green Berets—Daryl descends from the early frontier men who 'knew' Indians, who could appropriate guerilla warrior tactics but retain their innate white Americanness (Slotkin, 1973). He also bears witness to native customs and mythologies, noting that the flower 'Cherokee Rose' is named for the widespread genocide that underpins frontier mythology, specifically grief over lost ones on the Trail of Tears ('Cherokee Rose' 2:4). Viewers have seen Daryl escape captivity multiple times over the years, so his helplessness in the face of Saviors' torture tactics—music torture, beatings, solitary confinement, and a diet of dog food sandwiches—is particularly poignant. By the time the Alexandrians see him next, he is docile and living his own bare life, wordlessly following Negan's commands, unable to make eye contact with his own community.

The season seven episode, 'The Cell', contrasts a montage of Dwight's (Austin Amelio) transculturation to Daryl's continued rebellion, which casts him in solitary confinement, naked in a dark cell, subjected to musical torture tactics reminiscent of American units' techniques at far-

flung military prisons in Iraq (7:3). As one US interrogator explained why they played heavy metal nonstop for prisoners, ‘They can’t take it. If you play it for twenty-four hours, your brain and body functions start to slide, your train of thought slows down, and your will is broken’ (Hill, 2012: 218). The repetition of The Collapsable [*sic*] Hearts Club’s ‘Easy Street’ prompted Stuart Jeffries to point out that the audience was subject to the same torture that it now somehow deserves:

One of season seven’s unwitting themes: the TV audience suffers along with members of Rick’s crew. It’s as if us voyeurs are finally being called to account for our sick viewing habits. The pleasures of watching zombie slaying that sustained us through six seasons now have their pains: do we like to see humans suffer and feel some of that suffering ourselves? Not so much. (*The Guardian* 2016)

Daryl initially encountered Dwight in the season six episode that introduces the Saviors as threats (‘Always Accountable’ 6:6). With his wife Sherry (Christine Evangelista) and her sister Tina (Liz E. Morgan), Dwight attempted to escape Sanctuary and find members of their former group because they were not ‘earning enough’ to pay for Tina’s insulin. Dwight knocks out Daryl, and the three take his motorcycle to Negan to help pay their debt, but Daryl escapes, inadvertently with their insulin. When he returns it to them, Dwight explains that he thought Daryl was with the Savior hunting party searching for the escapees. Tina succumbs to zombie bites, and, while Daryl helps him dig her grave, he invites them to Alexandria. Dwight instead holds him at gunpoint for his crossbow and steals his bike. Sherry tells him they’re sorry, to which Daryl responds, ‘You’re gonna be’ (‘Always Accountable’ 6:6).

In ‘The Cell’, we learn that Dwight’s renewed ‘safety’ within Sanctuary has come at the price of an iron burn on his face and the transaction of Sherry into sexual enslavement as one of

Negan's wives. Her position in Negan's harem is essentially what the Puritans feared the Indians would do to their white women in an apt testament to Negan's messianic vision of himself and a stern reminder that many Savivors are themselves his captives. Dwight's rewards include getting to watch VHS tapes of '80s sitcoms, his own room, his favorite sandwiches, and Daryl's motorcycle jacket. As Dwight continues his attempts to convince Daryl to embrace Sanctuary to justify his own choices, the shots of him studying the captive zombies suggest that he is questioning his own confidence in Negan's system (7:3). As Rys observes, 'there isn't much difference between Daryl and those zombies. They're all going nowhere, tormented and trapped between life and death' (Vulture 2016). But after Sherry slips a key into Daryl's cell to help him escape—and flees Sanctuary on her own—Dwight becomes a double agent, assisting Alexandria in season eight's long war to destroy the Savivors, highlighting the danger of rescuing a captive who may turn 'savage' again.

Conclusion: Perpetual Captivity

The Walking Dead underscores this danger through season nine to, at the time of writing, the end of season ten. The Alexandrians initially take Negan prisoner as mark of civilization going forward. In his cell, Negan typologically informs Rick the world he's making is just getting ready for him, the one true Savior. When Maggie comes to kill him to avenge Glenn, however, Negan abjectly begs for death, captive to the memory of his dead wife. Seeing his death as a release from torment, Maggie refuses, telling him he's 'worse than dead' ('The First Day of the Rest of Your Life' 7:16). In many ways, all the characters exist in this liminal state of tortuous captivity since the chance of reanimation after death haunts them all. After a time jump to six

years later, we observe Negan helping Judith (Cailey Fleming) with her math homework. Father Gabriel (Seth Gilliam) teaches him meditation, and Negan behaves alternately mockingly and sincerely to his caretakers. Negan eventually escapes when a distracted Gabriel fails to lock the door ('Evolution' 9:8). In the following episode, he steals a shovel and Judith's compass and goes to scale the wall when she stops him at gunpoint, reminding him that there's 'nothing' out there for him ('Adaptation' 9:9). She lets him leave after he promises he won't hurt anyone. Outside confinement for the first time, he kills some walkers, attempts to drink river water, and reflects on killing Abraham and Glenn. He finds a faux leather jacket to make him feel like his old self and is threatened by stray dogs. Negan also visits the Sanctuary to find it abandoned, one of his zombified henchman still staggering around the premises. Captivity is preferable to trying to live in a world that no longer exists, and so he returns on a motorcycle that Judith shoots out from under him and says he wants to go back to Alexandria after realizing she was right.

Negan does prove a useful captive: he attempts to counsel Michonne, one of the de facto leaders of Alexandria after Rick's departure in season nine. In 'The Storm' (9:16), he saves Judith when she runs after Daryl's dog in a blizzard. By season ten, he is permitted to help in the garden under observation, and in 'Ghosts' (10:3) the Alexandrians need him to help fight the menacing herds. In the following episode 'Silence the Whisperers', Negan tells Daryl he believes in their way of life, but he appears to escape while the council decides what to do with him (10:4). An Alexandrian, Brandon (Blaine Kern, III), the surviving son of two Savivors and an old-school Negan superfan, tags along with him, but when he murders a mother and child in the Savior way, Negan kills him in response. Yet captivity has changed Negan, and he seeks the leadership and shelter of season ten's 'Big Bad', the Whisperers, a group led by the vicious Alpha (Samantha Morton) who wear the masks of skinned walkers and mysteriously live

outdoors, directing the herds of the undead against their perceived enemies. In ‘Bonds’, Negan allows himself to be taken as their captive and tells the Whisperers that after being Alexandria’s prisoner for 8 years he’ll spill their secrets (10:6). Negan submits to their initiation ritual—digging graves, skinning zombies, and helping to hunt a boar to prove his worth. Although one Whisperer tells him he’s too loud and talkative to be one of them, Negan nevertheless appears to submit to Alpha, telling her, ‘I’m all in, whatever I’ve got, it’s yours’ (10:6). At the mid-season break in November 2019, it was unclear whether Negan attempting to transculturate into the Whisperers is a ruse. After all, he is a talkative man who likes his creature comforts and gets bored easily.

His apparent transculturation into the Whisperers in the second half of the season involves having sex with Alpha and engaging her in mutual arm whipping (‘Squeeze’ 10:9, ‘Morning Star’ 10:11). But as viewers learn later in ‘Look at the Flowers’(10:14), Carol originally set him free from his cell to go undercover with the Whisperers to kill Alpha and present her severed head to Carol for her to set on a spike. This visual recalls both the Whisperers’ same action against four captive Alexandrians previously as well as the Pequot Wars of the English colonial period when the captivity narrative takes root (‘The Calm Before’ 9:15; Lipman 2008: 4). Lipman writes, ‘Algonquian Indians often exchanged wartime trophies to affirm alliances, whereas the English decapitated enemies and displayed their heads to establish dominance’ (2008: 4). However, because Negan took too long to present his war trophy, Carol refuses to guide him back to Alexandria and abandons him to be alone and ‘free’, only to once again be taken captive by Daryl. But when Negan kills the Whisperers who hold them at gunpoint to pledge loyalty to their ‘new Alpha’, Daryl begrudgingly allows him to return to the Alexandrians where he can revise his own narrative from menacing captor to triumphant captive

(10:14). However, as Negan explains to Daryl, though he liked Alpha, ‘she killed the wrong people’, evoking ‘The Same Boat’ when Negan’s former outpost of Saviors held Maggie and Carol captive in revenge for their massacre of the Saviors (6:13). Transculturation in *The Walking Dead* can thus mean realigning with former enemies once considered too brutal and savage to allow to live.

There is much irony in the Big Bad sociopath becoming the perpetual captive until he kills the *right* threat to the Alexandrians. Moreover, Negan’s liminal status of being both within and excluded from multiple communities encapsulates what the Puritans feared most: the age-old potential danger that the captive will take on the savagery of the ‘Other’ community and endanger the ‘civilized’. The last two episodes of season 10 provide his rocky reconciliation and uneasy peace with Lydia (Cassady McClincy), Alpha’s rebellious daughter who earlier defected to the Alexandrians (‘The Tower’, 10:15; ‘A Certain Doom’, 10:16). Negan’s late-series shifts from Big Bad, to Savior captor, to recivilized Alexandrian captive, to enculturated enemy Whisperer, to free fighter in the Alexandrian army in the series finale’s final battle—which defeats the Whispers and their walker herd—reflect all of the outcomes of the captivity narrative except his own death (10:16). In the series finale he is allowed to help regenerate the show’s protagonists’ mythic exceptionalism through violence. While he’s proven useful, there’s no certainty he will remain transculturated, or go ‘native’ again and become a threat once more, or turn lone wolf and go off on his own, as he does in the original graphic novel. But, given all the traumas he has suffered and perpetuated amid the zombie pandemic, he and any other *Walking Dead* character certainly could and probably will be victimized again. Perhaps this reveals that the most disturbing part of the series’ narrative cycle is not really the endless fear of becoming undead or forever guarding against the next new threat that might kill characters, whether living

or undead. Rather, living on this postapocalyptic frontier means always falling victim to repeated rendition in a war without end, as if Mather's otherworldly predestination has been supplanted by a perpetual purgatorial afterlife of hellish punishments: hell on earth.

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Notes

¹ See also Waller 1986:

² See also Sugg 2015.

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