**Chapter 5**

**An End to Monstrosity: Horror, Queer Representation, and the Trump Kakistocracy**

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**Abstract:**

Queer representation in the horror genre - in literature as well as in film and TV - has long been part of a cultural narrative of punishment and invisibility. Deviant sexuality has been posited as the cause of the murderous madness of characters such as Norman Bates in *Psycho* and Jame Gumb in *The Silence of the Lambs*, a trope that may be traced back to the lesbian vampires of Le Fanu’s *Carmilla*. This gave way to the stereotype of the gay supporting character, typically among the first to be killed off.  In horror, even gender-nonconforming characters not specifically identified as LGBT have tended not to survive to the end of the film or the season. In the years leading up to the Trump regime, however, queer representation has taken another turn, this time away from capital punishment for existence and toward narratives of survival and resilience (*Fear the Walking Dead* and *American Horror Story*). Numerous examples now exist of LGBT characters having the strength, the stamina, and the adaptability to fend for themselves. This may have its origins in a shift in societal attitudes, but it is also likely attributable to the growing gay and lesbian presence in the entertainment industry. A number of the current generation of LGBT filmmakers and writers are old enough to remember more hostile times - and in some cases to have survived the devastation of the early HIV-AIDS years. Moore argues that this trend of resilience is unlikely to change.

**Chapter Text:**

**1. Introduction**

There has been a significant shift in the way LGBTQ characters are represented in the horror genre on film and TV since at least 2015, an interval that roughly corresponds with the end of the Obama presidency and the beginning of the Trump era. In this chapter, I am extending and expanding upon the work of Darren Elliott-Smith in *Queer Horror Film and Television: Masculinity and Sexuality at the Margins* (2016), which is essentially the jumping-off point for this research, and Harry M. Benshoff in *Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuality and the Horror Film* (1997). (Elliott-Smith’s book picks up more or less where Benshoff’s leaves off.) Moreover, in the seminal *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies* (1987), Vito Russo devotes a chapter to the subject of queer horror, and many of his observations are as relevant today as they were when he made them three decades ago. Herein, I will focus primarily on *The Walking Dead*, *Fear the Walking Dead*, *American Horror Story*, the television remake of *The Exorcist*, and several of their most relevant predecessors to argue that the connection previously made between queer sexuality and monstrous Otherness is finally being severed.

First, though: Does representation actually matter? I maintain that it does, albeit within realistic expectations, and I would like to get that question out of the way first by looking at arguments from both sides before focusing on horror. In *The Queer Politics of Television*, Samuel Chambers argues that concerning ourselves with representation is pointless: ‘it can provide absolutely no political guarantees’ (2009, p. 87). Taken at face value, this is a sensible, defensible statement. However, Chambers further suggests that a critique based on *norms* would be more useful: specifically, that attacking those norms by subverting them would be more efficacious in terms of bringing about social change and representative justice (2009). Although this line of reasoning has merit in the abstract in the sense that it acknowledges the lack of guaranteed outcomes, it lacks a practical corollary. Kylo-Patrick Hart, who conducted a study on post-1960 representation of gay men in the American media, takes the opposite view: ‘Media representation… matters because representation is a form of social action, involving the production of meanings that ultimately have real effects,’ (2000, p. 62). So does Amy Villarejo, whose writing in *Ethereal Queer: Television, Historicity, Desire* extends the work of Theodor Adorno, making a case that the matter of representation is less about the struggle for social justice -- and emphatically *not* in the sense that ‘television reflects its viewers; that television *ought* to do so; that it has an *obligation* toward diversity of representation; or that diverse representation leads to political change’ (2014, p. 3; emphasis in the original) -- than it is about the proposition that no boundary exists between ‘us’ and TV. To put it another way, we should care about representation for the same reason we look in mirrors.

Although I side with Villarejo and Hart, I note that little consensus exists -- to say nothing of the disconnect between LGBTQ theorists and the wider queer community -- around what form representation should take and who should be the arbiters of its validity and effectiveness. The queer community, to the extent that one can even be said to exist, is too diverse for such consensus to be achievable. Case in point: while welcomed by some, the (hyper)masculine gay men of *Dante’s Cove* have been called inauthentic and said to pander to gay male anxieties about perceived effeminacy (Elliott-Smith, 2016). More recently, the sitcom *Modern Family*, which is perhaps more often credited for its positive depictions of gay couple Cam and Mitch, has also been criticized: it has been pointed out that Cam and Mitch are desexualized in a way that is inconsistent with the other, heterosexual characters (Rosenberg, 2010; Kornhaber, 2015). As Sean Donovan writes in Gender Forum,

Queer representation in shows such as Modern Family seeks to incorporate and devour queerness: surrounding it in normativity structures and, ultimately, destroying it. The show is every bit the polemical extreme of ‘reproductive futurism’ defined by Lee Edelman in his landmark work *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004), in which he argues that the rhetorical figure of the child in culture becomes a means of solidifying heteronormative stability, as well as Lisa Duggan’s model of homonormativity. (2016, p. 43)

And given the controversy surrounding the homicidal lesbian characters in Paul Verhoeven’s 1992 thriller *Basic Instinct*, which some viewers interpreted as ‘mov[ing] female heroism and cinematic lesbianism to a new and exciting place’ and others saw as ‘part of a general smear campaign that Hollywood has long maintained against queers’  (Halberstam, 1993, p. 196), it should not be surprising that opinions are strong on the subject of representation but inconsistent on what it ought to entail. At the very least, the conclusion one can draw from all this is that queer audiences are difficult to satisfy.

There is much validity in the point that these shows often seem to collapse queerness into a narrowly gender-conforming and heteronormative array of body types and relationship structures, but so great is/was the stigma around homosexuality that it was only as recently as the 1970s that queer characters were openly identified as such on American TV at all. Often this happened on topical episodes of popular series (Russo, 1987; Villarejo, 2014; Elliot-Smith, 2016; et al.), and those shows ‘continued to trade in stereotypes [even as they] also circulated more lingering and intimate glimpses of queer life-worlds’ (Villarejo, 2014, p. 23). It has taken much longer to see characters whose queerness is incidental, and whose same-sex relationships are treated with the same respect as heterosexual ones. While there is room for improvement, some of the criticism originating from queer theory is also not helpful: it goes to nihilistic extremes, as can be seen in Edelman’s linkage of queerness to the Freudian death drive and recommendation that queers embrace an abjected status in (or outcast from) society, rejecting heteronormative institutions such as marriage in favor of unspecified or ill-defined alternatives (2004). We also see this in the ever-expanding definition of queer that interpellates terrorists with members of the sexual or gender minorities they might prefer to blow up (Ruti, 2017). While Edelman’s underlying points about the myth of reproductive futurity and its prominence are well taken, I find his reverence for abjection problematic  and patronizing toward the subjects whose lives queer theory was ostensibly intended to speak to, of, and for. (I am not a Freudian, and further discussion would be outside the scope of this chapter.)

To bring this back to horror, Barbara Creed invokes Julia Kristeva’s writings on the abject to argue that an imperative exists to exclude the abject, ‘separating the human from the non-human and the fully constituted subject from the partially formed subject. Ritual becomes a means by which societies both renew their initial contact with the abject element and then exclude that element’ (1986, p. 68). By this chain of logic, if we start at queer theory and follow the thread to discover what is being said about the abject space Edelman and other queer theoreticians would have us occupy, we are to go on equating queer status with the abject, the monstrous, even with human waste. To put it another way, to be treated like shit, which I contend is not necessarily still the baseline for queer representation in horror.

Before we move on, a brief and final comment on my usage of the word ‘queer’. As Michael Warner says in ‘Something Queer about the Nation State’,

The term does not translate very far with any ease, and its potential for transformation seems mostly specific to a cultural context that has not been brought into focus in the theory of queerness. Even in cultures with well-organized gay movements and a taste for Americanisms, there has been little attempt to import the politics with which the label has been associated here. In the New World Order, we should be more than usually cautious about global utopianisms that require American slang.  (2002, p. 209)

Herein, I use ‘queer’ for convenience and inclusivity, and I use it interchangeably with ‘LGBTQ’.

**2. An end to monstrosity?**

In lieu of the generic linkage between queer sexuality and monstrosity/ the Other, we are beginning to see resilience and capability as a new baseline in queer representation. This may be less about Trumpism than timing, although the most recent seriess of the TV series I cited in the introduction seem to bear out my hypothesis. This is not to say that *every* LGBTQ character in horror TV and film is portrayed in this manner now; ‘heterosexuality is [still] framed in conjunction with normalcy, and queer characters are positioned as foils to leading players’ (Sevenich, 2015, p. 36). But the reflexive tendency to demonize and/or exterminate them (‘punishment for existing’) seems to be waning. Furthermore, I contend that structural homophobia has not necessarily been behind every decision to kill off a queer character in these series.

A key precursor to this emerging pattern in representation would be campy homonormative horror series such as *Dante’s Cove* and *The Lair*, and the ‘queer slasher film’ *Hellbent*, all of which were written by gay men and produced with gay audiences in mind. This is also true of their immediate predecessors, the ‘killer queers [featured in] the queerly produced films *The Living End* (1992), *Swoon* (1992), or *Sister, My Sister* (1995)’ (Benshoff, 1997, p. 232). These films would most likely never have been produced by straight filmmakers. Because of horror’s inherently conservative genre requirement that what is monstrous (which Creed and Kristeva posit as the abject) must be eradicated in order to preserve the norm, the narrative in which queers are punished for existing has also gone by the wayside (perhaps not completely, but it is notably absent from these early works). Instead, as Elliott-Smith (2016) points out, these transitional works are more propelled by gay male insecurities based on physical appearance, desirability, and HIV/AIDS. And Benshoff, in his own book, hints that this ‘cultural equation of monster and homosexual,’ which ‘continues to be exploited in new and vigorous ways’, may finally be within measurable distance of its end but does not provide examples (1997, p. 238). I argue that we now have them.

There are three significant examples of non-monstrous, non-Othered, capable queer resilience in lead characters in current/recent horror series: Colman Domingo’s Victor Strand in *Fear the Walking Dead*, Sarah Paulson’s Ally Mayfair-Richards in *American Horror Story: Cult*, and Ben Daniels’s Father Marcus Keane in *The Exorcist*. Because *The Exorcist* was cancelled after the end of its second series, I will focus more on Victor Strand and Ally Mayfair-Richards. Strand appears for the first time in the fifth episode of series One: he and one of the other series leads are in a military holding cell at the beginning of the zombie outbreak, as Los Angeles and other major cities are being overrun. Strand is almost supernaturally calm in the midst of this chaos; he is shrewd, wealthy, conniving, and persuasive, at one point in episode 6 (‘The Good Man) saying ‘the only way to survive a mad world is to embrace the madness’ (*Fear the Walking Dead*, 2015). Capable of making an instantaneous assessment of his situation, he identifies the one other person in the holding cell most likely to help him escape and shows no empathy whatsoever toward the remaining prisoners in the facility with them. He has a yacht offshore, anchored and ready to serve as refuge and getaway vehicle, and a destination in mind -- the ranch his partner’s family owns down in Mexico. As the series has progressed, his character arc has been less about embracing madness (although he continually struggles against his impulses to flee and/or to betray people) and more about embracing humanity. In fact, his sexuality is not even revealed until the fourth episode of series Two (‘Blood in the Streets’), as he and the survivors he is traveling with attempt to make their way to a safe house he and his partner jointly own.

A pivotal FTWD episode that says much about the difference in the way LGBTQ characters are now portrayed in horror is *‘Sicut Cervus*’, the sixth in series Two, in which it is revealed that Strand’s partner Thomas Abigail (Dougray Scott) has been bitten and will soon die and turn into a zombie. Strand struggles with the choice of committing suicide in order to die with him, and is in fact encouraged to do so by Celia (Marlene Forté), a woman who works on the estate and who has been murdering people in the belief that they are resurrecting as ‘what comes next’ (AMC, 2016). In the end, and choosing to live, he shoots the zombie Thomas has turned into. Later, in ‘Pillar of Salt’ (episode 12), Strand is potentially fatally wounded when an aggrieved woman stabs him. He survives because other members of the group risk their lives to find medicine for him, which is not an outcome I would have expected ten years ago in a mainstream horror series like this one. In defiance of the “punishment for existing” narrative, Strand is (at the time of this writing, series Four is airing) one of two remaining leads to have survived since series One, the others (including, in the current series, Kim Dickens’s Madison) all having been killed off.

For much of the first half of *American Horror Story: Cult*, Ally Mayfair-Richards is anything *but* capable and resilient. In the series’s opening episode (‘Election Night’), the announcement of Donald Trump’s victory in the 2016 US presidential election sends Ally into a mental-health crisis. She sobs as she and her wife Ivy (Alison Pill) watch the results on TV; later in the episode, Ally has hallucinations of a pack of evil clowns while buying groceries. In the episodes that follow, more phobias (small, clustered holes; bloody objects; confined spaces) she had previously been able to manage with therapy resurface. As with every other series of *AHS*, there are multiple plot threads that will eventually more or less converge, often via the deaths of significant characters, a structure that has been interpreted as a destabilization and queering of the seriality of TV that ‘adopt[s] linear narration in only the most remote and temporary fashion’ (Geller and Banker, 2017, p, 37). In this case, it is not resilience but Ally’s fragility and its effects on the people around her that define her as a character. To make things worse, Ivy and other members of the titular cult (modeled to an extent on Trump and his supporters) have been gaslighting Ally with the intention of causing her to have a breakdown. They succeed: in episode 7 (‘Valerie Solanas Died for Your Sins: Scumbag’), two-thirds of the way through the series, she is hospitalized. In the following episode (‘Winter of Our Discontent’), upon being released, Ally learns of the plot against her and its place in a larger socio-political scheme being enacted by Kai Anderson, the cult’s leader (Evan Peters). In this episode (‘Winter of Our Discontent’), she begins to find her strength, seeking revenge against Ivy for her betrayal and then endeavoring to put an end to the cult. Significantly, whatever happens to Ally during her hospitalization happens offscreen, a temporal compression that may be read to indicate that the strength and decisiveness Ally exhibits after her discharge were always there. This is consistent with the background information given about her during the series: her psychological issues were under control until the election and the cult’s subsequent actions brought on her crisis. In the series finale (‘Great Again’), Ally successfully mounts a campaign for the U.S. Senate and entering a life of public service.

For both characters, sexual orientation is presented as a non-issue, of no more importance than that of anyone else in the story. By not having to negotiate the closet (which was a trope explored deeply in Alan Ball’s *Six Feet Under*, which with the ghosts that appeared in most episodes may also be seen as a forerunner of today’s queer horror representations [Chambers, 2003]), Stand and Ally are able to exist more or less free of the worries about who knows they are gay, who doesn’t, and what the reaction will be. They are in danger but not because they themselves are seen as monstrous. This approach contrasts sharply with the way the closet is dealt with in *The Exorcist*. Father Marcus is a priest, and the Catholic Church’s medieval stance on homosexuality creates a constant balancing act for him. Bad enough that he is not even entirely sure what his sexual identity is, a detail proposed by Ben Daniels, the actor who played him. In the original teleplay, Father Marcus was written as gay, but Daniels convinced Rolin Jones, the series One showrunner, that a more nuanced portrayal of sexuality would be more realistic. In the resulting version, Marcus entered the Church as a preteen, several years before his sexuality had developed. When he is finally excommunicated, he begins a process of self-discovery. Is he gay? Bisexual? This is left open-ended (Roots, 2017); in an interview given toward the end of series Two, series creator Jeremy Slater seems to confirm the open-endedness, saying in response to negative tweets about a scene in which Marcus kisses another man,

I saw a couple of homophobes on Twitter and my response is, ‘Good, fuck you. I’m glad you didn’t like it, I’m glad it ruined the show for you. You shouldn’t have good things in your life.’ If a homophobe can’t watch the show any more because one of the characters is gay, then I’m glad something good has come out of it. This is 2017 and we still have people throwing temper tantrums on line because they don’t want to see gay characters. I think it’s the last gasp of a certain breed of dinosaur that’s on the way out, and let them kick and scream as they go. (2017)

In the same interview, he goes on to confuse the issue by saying that ‘[w]e’ve said from the beginning that Marcus is a bisexual character, which is pretty rare on television in general and certainly on network television, where everyone has binary definitions of gay or straight’ (Slater, 2017). What matters more is the vehemence of Slater’s denunciation of homophobia, a stance unlikely to have been seen (much less printed verbatim) in the mainstream media a decade ago.

Ironically, the people he deals with in the secular world tend to accept him as he is; the demons he battles in his work as an exorcist are the ones who mock his sexual identity and lingering feelings of shame. Due to the nature of his work and the fact that he has survived it, resilience is almost a given. In the series, survives possession and any number of other harrowing supernatural attacks and emerges more or less unscathed. Had the show not been cancelled, it seems likely that the arc of his character development would have been toward greater certainty and security in his sexual identity, and thus more inner strength that would enable him to survive his job.

This trend of resilience, which I attribute largely to the growing influence of out gay and lesbian filmmakers and producers -- notably, Alan Ball, Ryan Murphy, and Brian Fuller -- was already in place by 2013. As members of Generation X, they would have come out -- as I did -- at a time when gay identity was tied up with the death sentence that was HIV/AIDS, and with queer activists screaming in the streets. Indeed, throughout much of the 1990s, gay men were often depicted as having HIV, almost as if impending death were the only acceptable gay storyline (Hart, 1999 and 2000). While resilience may be new as a descriptor when it comes to queer characters in film and on TV, there is nothing particularly new about it within the LGBTQ community. And while queers have been making films and TV since the origins of those two media, the fact that there are such prominent *out* ones is a genuinely new development. Many queer creatives above the age of forty are the ones HIV/AIDS and the bigots in the small towns where we grew up didn’t kill -- a statement that would have sounded hyperbolic five years ago but today, in light of the violence and growing political repression under the Trump administration seems worth pointing out once again. It is notable that these directors’ earlier projects confronted homophobia head-on: Ball’s 1999 film *American Beauty*, for example, was about a deeply closeted ex-Marine Corps colonel who believed his male next-door neighbor (played by Kevin Spacey) had seduced (in an ironic case of art imitating life) his teenage son. Homophobia and the characters’ reactions to it are recurring themes in *Six Feet Under*, as it also is in Ryan Murphy’s *Glee*.

Among the shows that are still on, it is probably not surprising that Ryan Murphy’s *American Horror Story* led the way with resilience among queer characters. In the most literal chronological sense, the direct forerunner would be Alan Ball’s *True Blood*, which was based on Charlaine Harris’s Southern Vampire Mysteries series and aired from 2008 until 2014. Setting the queer vampire characters (Pamela De Beaufort, played by Kristin Bauer van Stratten; Tara Thornton, played by Rutina Wesley) aside, it is Lafayette Reynolds (Nelsan Ellis) who is the show’s most prominent example of LGBTQ representation. Although Lafayette displays the same tough-mindedness we see in Victor Strand and post-institutionalization Ally Mayfair-Richards, I hesitate to suggest that *True Blood* went as far as these later series in delinking queer sexuality from the monstrous Other. Partly this is to do with Lafayette’s flamboyant appearance and exaggerated mannerisms throughout: he is not a cross-dresser, but a rather more complex figure who wears makeup and ostentatious jewelry, often appearing to be part pirate and part drag queen. In the story, he augments his job as a short-order cook by selling drugs and dabbling in prostitution. During series Three, he is shown to be a psychic medium, and in series Four, he is possessed by a malevolent spirit and forced to murder his lover (who himself was a male witch). Lafayette’s otherness is not merely a product of his outrageousness and his abilities, however. Among the human/living *True Blood* characters (more so in the TV series than the books), women, people of color, and sexual minorities tend to be supernaturals of one form or another, and straight white men tend to be ‘normal’. It is in this respect -- queer resistance rather than queer resilience -- that *True Blood* is the true forerunner to *American Horror Story.* If ‘violence against white men perpetrated by women and people of color disrupts the logic of represented violence so thoroughly that (at least for a while) the emergence of such unsanctioned violence has an unpredictable power’, as Jack Halberstam writes in ‘Imagined Violence/Queer Violence’ (1993, p. 191), the same logic should apply to queers vis-a-vis the heteronormative society that oppresses them.

*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (UPN, 1997 - 2003) might at first glance seem to be another early forerunner of queer resilience in horror, but it falls squarely into the punishment-narrative category of representation, arguably even more so than *True Blood*. Writer and showrunner Joss Whedon (whose godfather was gay) has gone on record as valuing positive representations of LGBTQ characters (Mangels, 2002). Although the show drew praise for having a lesbian lead character (Willow Rosenberg, played by Alyson Hanigan), her ‘sexual awareness coincided with her initiation into the dark arts’ (Kelly, 2016). After her girlfriend Tara (Amber Benson) was killed off -- in the first episode in which they had been shown having sex -- Willow ‘descen[ded] into black magic vengeance that not only turned her into a killer but imperiled her friends, her sanity, and eventually the world itself’ (Mangels, 2002). Even *True Blood*’s sanitized depiction (or lack thereof) of intimacy between Lafayette and his *brujo* boyfriend Jesús was less troubling: although there was a double standard in terms of how their sex life was depicted, at least Jesús didn’t die after their first time in bed together.

Where *True Blood* arguably paved the way for this shift in representation, Ryan Murphy has gone much further with it, although this did not become apparent until series 2 of *American Horror Story*. The gay couple in series 1 (2011, and later given the subtitle *Murder House*) were incidental enough not to warrant discussion here, but Lana Winters (played by Sarah Paulson), one of the main characters in *AHS: Asylum* (2012 - 13), is the embodiment of resilience as she survives commitment to the titular insane asylum, rape, a murder attempt, and an assortment of other horrors and indignities. Highly significant is the fact that, as Elliott-Smith points out, *Asylum* is set in the 1960s, a time in American history when homosexuality was still criminalized, which meant being publicly identified as LGBTQ could result in the imprisonment, commitment to a psychiatric institution, loss of employment, estrangement from family, or some combination of the above (2016). It is also significant that Murphy cast Sarah Paulson in this role: she has publicly identified herself as sexually fluid, but all of her acknowledged relationships in the last decade have been with women. This is the first of a number of casting and narrative choices in *AHS* that further support my contention that Ryan Murphy, Brad Falchuk, and the other principals in the show, aware of the issues related to representation and queer history, are choosing to set a new precedent.

Although *AHS*’s third (*Coven*) and fourth (*Freak Show*) seriess dealt very little with LGBTQ themes in the most literal sense, both were thoroughly queer in the academic sense by focusing on marginalized, oppressed subcultures (witches whose supernatural abilities are apparently an inborn trait which requires them to hide; the cast and crew of a traveling freak show in 1950s Florida). After *Asylum*, the next series to feature a prominent queer storyline was series Five, *Hotel* (2015 - 16). After two seriess with storylines that explored themes of queer experience and identity symbolically, *Hotel* went to the opposite extreme. Resilience in the strictest sense matters very little in this case, however, as most of the queer characters are supernatural in some way. For all its slaughter, queer and otherwise, *Hotel* is highly relevant to my discussion of queerness and monstrosity because it continues *AHS*’s trend, in increasingly clear evidence since *Asylum*, of queering itself. In *Hotel*, Ryan Murphy has made a (full-)frontal assault on the queerness-as-monstrosity trope by literally making all the queers monsters, presenting ‘queerness not as the monster that threatens community but as the antidote to the horror of heteronormativity or marriage, domesticity, monogamy, and family’ (Halberstam, 2005, p. 32). Like every other series, the plot is convoluted and does not lend itself to concise, coherent summary. Essentially, the shabby-chic and very haunted Hotel Cortez in downtown Los Angeles is owned by a bisexual vampire, played by Lady Gaga (who publicly identifies as bisexual), who despite her status as a bloodthirsty immortal is not immune to the ravages of bad investments. She contrives to sell the hotel to a bisexual-or-gay fashion designer (Will Drake, played by Cheyenne Jackson, who gay), who is later murdered and becomes a ghost. Among her lovers are Ramona Royale (played by Angela Bassett) and the possibly bisexual Donovan (played by Matt Bomer, who is gay): both vampires. The bartender is a bald transgender woman called Liz Taylor; played by Denis O’Hare (gay, publicly out), she chooses to be murdered so that she can become a ghost, united with her true love Tristan (bisexual, played by Finn Wittrock). As was the case with *Coven* and *Freak Show*, *Hotel* presents a sort of subculture that must be hidden from view of the outside world, only this time the queerness is explicit. Although these vampires can walk in sunlight and the ghosts have solidity and agency, safety requires them to keep their existence a secret. The origins of the vampirism in *Hotel* are not supernatural: it’s a blood-borne virus, an obvious HIV reference that harkens back to less-positive (ahem) circa-1990s gay male representations. Notably, the queer characters are all either already dead, or they die in the end, or become vampires or vampiric ghosts; together, they form an immortal, supernatural chosen family in a place that they own and control, where they are safe. In other words, the queer characters get the most subversive happy ending imaginable.

Like *AHS, The Walking Dead* was also an early adopter of queer resilience. The three surviving queer characters in Frank Darabont’s TV adaptation of *The Walking Dead* were among the first to embody this strand of toughness and resilience instead of horror-fodder victimhood, and of the three who have been killed off, it is notable that two had in common a certain fragility and risk-aversion (the third died in a gun battle). Tara Chambler, played by Alanna Masterson, was the first out queer character on the series. Introduced in series Four (2013), her presence on the show was a harbinger of the representation that would be seen in this series and others. Initially a member of an enemy faction of predatory survivors, Tara joins the group led by series lead Rick Grimes (Andrew Lincoln) and stays with them through the travails that ensue. She is introduced in the context of a relationship at first, but her girlfriend Alisha (Juliana Harkavy) is fatally shot during a battle between the two groups. Later, in series Six, Tara has a brief romance with Denise Cloyd (Merritt Wever), but Denise is murdered by yet another group of enemies (the Saviors) toward the end of the series. Near the midpoint of series 5 (2014 - 15), the first gay male characters are introduced: Aaron (no surname given; played by Ross Marquand) and his more reticent boyfriend Eric Raleigh (Jordan Woods-Robinson). Aaron and Eric were residents of the Alexandria Safe-Zone, a walled enclave in the Northern Virginia city of the same name, but had the role of scouts and rangers, venturing out into the zombie-overrun surrounding area in order to observe and recruit potential Alexandria residents. The third of *The Walking Dead*’s three prominent (and surviving) queer characters is Paul Rovia, nicknamed Jesus because of his appearance. Played by Tom Payne, Jesus has a somewhat similar recruiting and supply-scavenging role to Aaron and Eric at first. In series Six (2015 - 16), after Alexandria has been overrun, the survivors make their way to another (relatively) safe outpost, the Hilltop Colony, where Jesus is one of the first people they meet.

*The Walking Dead* has drawn criticism because of its depiction of (and perceived tendency to kill off) LGBTQ characters. In particular, Denise Cloyd’s death coincided with another highly visible lesbian character’s death on The OC’s post-apocalyptic science-fiction series *The 100*, and warrants discussion here. In the second and third seriess of *The 100*, series lead (Clarke Griffin, played by Eliza Taylor) is romantically involved with another woman (Lexa, played by Alycia Debnam-Carey. When Debnam-Carey won a lead role on the then-new *Fear the Walking Dead*, her character was written out of *The 100*, leading to accusations of homophobia; in response, she insisted in an interview with *The Hollywood Reporter* that the only motivation for eliminating the character was that she was leaving the series (2016). While an argument could be made that television writers ought to consider other plot devices than dramatic death scenes when actors leave shows, it was a legitimate ending for that character in that post-apocalyptic storyline; I do not see it as indicative of a larger trend of devaluing queer lives and characters, and my reading on the queer dynamics of *The Walking Dead* is similar. In this relentlessly bleak fictional universe, one of the overarching themes is the breakdown -- from conflict or from the fate worse than death that is resurrection as a zombie -- of interpersonal relationships: they often do not survive even if the characters in them do. Resourcefulness and toughness are valorized above caution and timidity, and I contend that the characters Denise and Eric died not because they were gay but because it was a statement that they fundamentally lacked the toughness and resilience necessary to survive. This show is not kind to its meeker characters -- or to any of its characters, really.

To return to the more recent past, *AHS: Roanoke* (series Six; 2016) may be read as a clear textual linkage between the previous two seriess’ examinations of the experiences of marginalized groups and the politicized dangers warned of in *Cult*. *Roanoke*, like Kevin Smith’s 2011 *Red State*, is a stark and horrific romp in redneck-infested woods. Harkening back as far as *Deliverance* (1972) in its portrayals of hapless city people menaced in the country wilderness, *Roanoke* is essentially a ghost story with two connected groups of antagonists: the ghosts of the disappeared Roanoke Colony and the inbred (but living) family who serve them. The premise of the story is that a documentary about an interracial Los Angeles couple have moved to this house in a remote, rural corner of North Carolina. Things went horribly, supernaturally wrong and culminated in what appeared to be a murder-suicide. Because the documentary, *My Roanoke Nightmare*, was such a success, the producer has decided to create a sequel using the actors who had played the roles of the first film. In a clever usage of *mise en abyme*, the actors actually go to the house during the ‘Blood Moon’ series when the original murders took place. There, they find themselves menaced by the same ghosts and rednecks who killed the original inhabitants.

Like *Deliverance*, *Roanoke* seems to be saying that city and country don’t mix; people from blue states and big cities leave them at their own peril. The interracial couple Shelby (Lily Rabe) and Matt (Andre Holland) may be read as queer; certainly they are Others in the eyes of the locals, as are the actors playing the actors who portray them (Sarah Paulson and Cuba Gooding Jr.). Throughout, *Roanoke* shows us condemnatory/purgative attacks against these outsiders. The ghosts arrived and died in what is now America in the late 1500s and have the morals to match. The pattern that emerges is in their viewpoint, the modern day itself is the Other, and although they label it as sacrifice carried out on religious grounds, in essence they are attacking and obliterating anyone who represents an incursion into their sixteenth-century norms. The hillbillies, they understand, but Hollywood people, mixed-race couples, African Americans, Asian Americans, and homosexuals violate their views on the natural order of things and must be wiped out. In other words, *Roanoke* is a provocative exploration of Trumpism.

**3. Ultimately...**

Does art (for my purposes here, TV and film) lead, or does it follow? I believe it does both simultaneously because, as Villarejo argues, it is less a *product* of us than it is an *extension* of us. Overall, I expect the resilience narrative to persist, at least for the near future. To the extent that we may view the Trump kakistocracy as a class war, the financial success of productions such as *AHS, The Walking Dead,* and *The Exorcist* is likely to trump (ahem) the growing dystopian trend in American governance. Even if Trump does not remain in office, the social divisions that have surfaced during his tenure in the White House are unlikely to be easily and quickly resolved. It is too soon to tell whether our political future will be *The Handmaid’s Tale* or *Sense8*, but either outcome may well go hand-in-hand with a narratives of resistance in the wake of the trauma of the last few years. Moreover, the disruptive power of the Internet, and the entrance of web-based producers of TV and film (the latter being of particular relevance because this distribution model sidesteps cinemas and brings them straight into viewers’ homes) Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon suggests that these representations are likely to remain the norm. Another positive development (although some will not take it as such) is the trend of demonizing the traditional enemies of all that is queer: rednecks, religious fundamentalists, and their associated belief systems and institutions. The queer characters in the film *Red State,* which featured a cult of murderous, well-armed, rabidly homophobic Christian zealots, may not have survived, but neither did most of the cast; more recently, the TV adaptation of *The Exorcist* has featured a demonically compromised Catholic Church, and in its hellish bureaucracy, the figurative is made literal. If, as Villarosa contends, we are TV and TV is us (2014), the question of representation is neither obsolete nor irrelevant. Yes, it would be a welcome change for more queer characters and relationships to survive within the horror genre. Representation in horror matters because character deaths tell us about who is seen to matter in society and who does not. At the same time, horror is not the genre we should look to for ‘happily ever after’ representations in the stories and their endings, empowerment for its own sake; and not every onscreen death is a manifestation of homophobia.

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