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### The Subversion of Ableism in Robert Kirkman's *The Walking Dead*

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**The Subversion of Ableism in Robert Kirkman's *The Walking Dead***

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MA of English

Spring 2014

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George Romero's 1968 classic film *Night of the Walking Dead* established the modern image of the zombie as the "familiar figure of a decaying corpse shuffling in a somnambulistic state, eyes glazed and arms held stiffly forward, in the mindless pursuit of human flesh" (Pulliam 723). Within the past decade zombies have become ubiquitous in popular culture, appearing in commercials, jokes, television shows, films, video games, and novels.<sup>1</sup> In 2008, after shaking hands at a debate with Barack Obama, John McCain made a face when he tried to exit from the wrong side of the stage. Cameras captured his expression, and the image went viral with jokes and references to "'Zombie McCain'" (McAlister).

The pervasiveness of zombies in popular culture has led to a surge of critical interest in the subject. At its most fundamental level, the zombie myth reflects social and cultural anxieties about the loss of individuality, about being consumed by and subsumed into a collective Other. The fear of zombies is the fear of losing the unique characteristics that make one human. Pulliam maintains that the zombie's "most fearsome aspect is its lack of that Protestant human virtue, free will" (725), and that in contemporary capitalist societies becoming a part of this group is an inevitability; it is just a matter of time before someone dies and when they do, they will become an Other. The nature of the zombie in Kirkman's zombie apocalypse is that once someone dies, no matter what the cause, as long as the brain is intact, the person will rise from the dead as a zombie.<sup>2</sup>

Another common fear associated with the zombie as Other is xenophobia. This reading of zombies as an invasion of foreigners applies mainly to early zombie films, primarily the 1930s through the 1960s, which associated zombies with voodoo and slavery. In these films, the flesh-eating monsters are raised from the dead so that they can do as their masters command; while they are not connected to historically specific forms of slavery, they are slaves in that they are used for unpaid, unskilled labor. The connection between zombies and voodoo, and its implications in terms of xenophobia, seem less applicable to later, science-fiction zombie films and the images of zombies that have dominated the media since the late 1960s; but, one could argue that xenophobia still resonates in zombie media, as immigration, particularly illegal immigration, is a much debated and controversial

topic in recent years. The fear of the Other continues today, but the fear has shifted more from a mixing of the races to a fear that the Other will consume jobs, space, and resources.

The same reasons that have led critics to associate zombies with the forced labor of slavery have produced readings of zombies as exploited workers — unskilled and, more importantly, unpaid labor. Zombies therefore can also represent the working class, drones that labor mindlessly for the benefit of their master, as in the origin stories of the zombie, in which the voodoo user creates the illusion of the victim's death, later resurrecting them to use them for their labor.<sup>3</sup> American horror films originally depicted zombies as creatures brought back from the dead for the purpose of doing evil deeds for their master, not because they are simply searching for flesh to consume.

Many critics read zombies as representing capitalist consumer culture. Webb and Byrland suggest that capitalism itself “works as an analogue of zombiedom because it too is predicated on insatiable appetite, and the drive to consume” (89). While zombies in the zombie apocalypse search for flesh, consumer zombies look for great deals and items that they want rather than need. Some critics argue, then, that zombies are the perfect consumer, having no mind and wishing to devour with “insatiable” hunger.<sup>4</sup>

Zombies have also been interpreted as a symbol of the Cold War and the threat of terrorism, representing the hidden danger in the Other that could appear at any moment.<sup>5</sup> Zombie apocalypse movies tend to coincide with “periods of social and political unrest, particularly during wars such as those in Vietnam and Iraq” (Bishop 13). Accordingly, it is the image of war that is reflected in the zombie apocalypse, pitting zombies — mobile, rotting, dead humans — against living humans; visually, it is human body against human body, as in actual non-drone war. In zombie apocalypse tales, government structures, law, and social order fail. With the rules gone there is the threat of “bodily harm, rape, and murder” not from zombies, but from human beings (Bishop 25). Thus the zombies provide the excuse for the indulgence of violently criminal human nature at its basest.

Considering the surplus of critical readings of zombies in popular culture, it is peculiar that the

marked body of the zombie has not been the subject of any sustained reading from a disability studies perspective. Nor have critics examined the violence that zombies do to the bodies of the survivors, or living humans. This essay explores the ways in which the zombie apocalypse reflects social and cultural anxieties about marked and impaired bodies—not the bodies of the zombies themselves, but of the human beings who must struggle to survive against them.

Robert Kirkman's graphic novel *The Walking Dead* was first published in 2003 and has continued to be published without interruption; it is now on its 21<sup>st</sup> chapter.<sup>6</sup> In 2010 the graphic novel was followed by a television series that is still in production. The television show's first episode of the fourth season had 16.1 million viewers, another 5 million viewers more than the year before (Kissell). And contrary to popular belief, "6.1 million of those who tuned in to Season Three of TWD were adults 25 to 54. This means that the series is not just appealing to violence-craving, video-gaming, teen boys" (Duran). The television adaptation of *The Walking Dead* is incredibly popular and is becoming increasingly so with each passing year, which is also making the graphic novel series — originally popular in its own right — even more so. In an interview, Kirkman stated that "'we've seen a significant uptick in sales of all the print works since the TV show has launched [...] but sales have always been good'" (Reid). Millions of copies of the comic series have sold, partially thanks to the increased demand from the television series, but Kirkman insists that the series will continue to be printed as a comic and the show will be based off of its original form (Reid).

In both the graphic novel and the television series, the marked body of the survivor is at the center of the narrative. These bodies are marked, for the most part, by amputation: extremities that have been bitten by zombies have to be amputated in order to stop the bacterial infection that these bites cause. Because all zombies have marked bodies, as do many of the survivors, both the graphic novel and the television adaptation naturally foreground wounded, torn, amputated bodies. But the graphic novel does so more consistently and brutally than the television series, marking the bodies by taking away a hand, arm, leg, ear, or eye. *The Walking Dead* thus gives impaired characters an

unprecedented visibility in popular culture.

The definition of disability I follow here is that of the ADA: “a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities such as walking, seeing, and hearing, of an individual” (Disabilities and Impairment Defined). I use the term “impaired” rather than “disabled” in most characters’ cases, because though their functions may be limited, the characters who are missing body parts still fight on. Kirkman does not flinch from showing how difficult it is for them to survive, as Rick is almost killed several times because of his impairment, a missing hand. “Disability” implies a lack of ability, but Rick shows time and time again that he is capable of the most important actions. Just because Rick can perform in most contexts, however, does not mean that it is easy for him: his lack of a hand is foregrounded constantly as an impairment.

The politics of able-bodiedness versus disability are endemic to zombie narratives. Zombies were once living, whole individuals who are now shambling corpses, decaying and falling apart, with body parts missing. They seek to take bites out of living human bodies, which will make those living humans more like zombies —marked and, later, undead. In Kirkman’s zombie apocalypse narrative, zombie bites spread infection, but it doesn’t take a bite to turn someone into a zombie: everyone is infected by some kind of disease, and anyone who dies, even from other forms of sickness or natural causes, becomes a zombie. The only way that this can be stopped is if the brain is destroyed, as the undead zombie still requires a brain in order to function.

Dying more often than not leaves some form of mark on the body. As such, to be a zombie is to be marked and, inevitably, to be marked is to be a zombie. I use the term “marked” to refer to a body that has been permanently altered in some way, often involving physical impairment as well as a change in physical appearance. An unmarked body, which I refer to as “whole,” has yet to be altered or damaged in any discernible way. In *The Walking Dead*, most human beings who are marked are marked by bites, which will eventually kill the person due to infection.

Tobin Siebers points out that it is commonly believed that “having an able body and mind

determines whether one is a quality human being” (3-4). Ableism, therefore, is discrimination or prejudice against people with disabilities. According to disability studies theorists such as Siebers and Lennard Davis, “most people do not want to consider that life’s passage will lead them from ability to disability” (Siebers 66). During their lives, especially as they age, everyone will eventually experience some form of disability. Because everyone who dies then becomes a zombie, the zombie apocalypse intensifies this notion, constantly reminding us of the certainty that everyone will experience disability; it forces individuals to deal with the fact that they too will become marked and their body impaired or disabled.

The ableist notion that human beings must be physically whole to be of value to society is the discriminatory assumption that Robert Kirkman targets in *The Walking Dead*. In Kirkman’s graphic novel series, Rick Grimes and his group of living humans are known as the “survivors.” Rick, the leader of this group, is a man who loses his hand. Kirkman’s characterization of Rick defies the pop-culture norm of the hero as handsome and able-bodied. Kirkman gives the central place in his narrative to a group of characters with impaired bodies, accentuating the threat to the integrity of the body as one that could result in impairment at any time; in this way, he challenges long-established representations of the protagonist’s body in popular culture. The imaginative world of the zombie apocalypse dramatizes and intensifies Siebers’s point about “life’s passage [...] from ability to disability”: anyone might, at any time, suddenly become a marked body, impaired or disabled. This paper will trace the ways in which *The Walking Dead* creates sympathy for, and readerly identification with, this misfit group of marked survivors. At first they must struggle only against the hordes of flesh-eating zombies, but later, and more importantly, the survivors must fight other groups of living humans with whole, unmarked bodies, who covet the security, provisions, and supplies that the protagonists have worked so hard to obtain.

The characters in the series who express the ableist perspective explicitly compare the bodies of the marked survivors to those of the zombies, which they refer to as “monsters.” Those unimpaired,

unmarked survivors who attach the stigma of monstrosity to impaired survivors do so solely because of their marked bodies, not because of their actions. This oppression reflects the historical treatment of people with deformities and physical deviations from the norm, specifically the ableist oppression that Lennard Davis and other critics have examined in Victorian culture, in which such bodies were deemed monstrous.<sup>7</sup> Long before the nineteenth century, marked bodies and deviations from the physical norm were sometimes, though not always, considered welcome variations,<sup>8</sup> as in Ancient Greek depictions of Hephaestus, who was represented with his feet “twisted around backwards or sideways” (Dolmage 7). In the context of Ancient Greek society, this articulation of his feet does not signify impairment but rather ability: that it allows him to move from side to side faster and therefore to forge more efficiently. While not everyone would want feet twisted in such a manner, the Ancient Greeks welcomed differences in individuals where it could help them specialize in perspective fields of work. During the Victorian period, however, deformed or disabled individuals were represented as “pathetic, helpless, pitiable, or monstrous,” even “evil” (Rodas 65-79). Lennard Davis observes that “more often than not [Victorian] villains tend to be physically abnormal: scarred, deformed, or mutilated” (11). Physical abnormalities signify moral corruption, or inherent evil. Throughout Victorian literature and culture we see this association between deformity and/or disability and “criminal activity, mental incompetence, [and] sexual license” (Davis 9).

The association between disability and monstrosity can also be found in the horror film. “Body horror,” a subgenre of horror, is “characterized by the manipulation and warping of the normal state of bodily form and function” (Lopez Cruz 161). Lopez Cruz argues that contemporary horror does not focus on the death of characters, but rather on the destruction of the body, which changes people into monsters. In horror texts, more often than the acts of violence of the monsters, it is the physical appearance of the monstrous body that incites fear. Having a monstrous body leads the individual to act like a monster. Accordingly, it is not the zombie’s apparent need to bite and kill that is terrifying, but rather its appearance as a walking, rotting, dilapidated corpse. In the zombie genre, this bodily



deformity turns one into a monstrous Other. In *The Walking Dead*, however, the survivors are not monsters: instead they are the heroes of the graphic novel series. Moreover, their marked bodies do not disable them, but only impair or limit them to a certain extent. They can still fight, lead, and do almost everything else, but they often struggle in performing their tasks. The graphic novel does not make light of the difficulties of trying to survive with a grievous wound or missing limb, but it depicts characters who can adjust and take action in spite of impairment. While it is clear that these characters are impaired and must face numerous struggles, they do have agency.

The graphic novel is a genre that inherits the energies of the horror film, using visual spectacle in order to convey the horror of monsters. It is in this medium that Kirkman places Rick and his group, the survivors and protagonists of his graphic novel series, forcing them to live in a world of horror. They start off with whole, unmarked bodies, but over the course of the series, through various injuries and amputations, they become fragmented and marked. Most amputations in the series are an attempt to save a fellow survivor from becoming infected by a zombie bite; by severing the limb, they attempt to stop the bacteria from spreading throughout the bloodstream. In the very beginning there are no marked bodies, for the most part; the first chapter, *Days Gone Bye*, introduces all of the characters and shows them to be completely able-bodied with no distinguishing marks on any of them. The only exception is the main character, Rick Grimes, who wakes up from a coma with a mostly healed gunshot wound to the abdomen that he got before the outbreak, during his job as a police officer. Since the graphic novel series follows Rick, who is in a coma at the beginning of the zombie apocalypse, we as readers are also unaware of the events that transpired in the weeks before his awakening; like Rick, we do not know what caused this disaster.

Rick is, at first, practically disabled, having a hard time even standing, let alone being capable of fending off a zombie; however, this condition is not permanent. Well before the first chapter is over, Rick returns to his able-bodied self, able to do anything and everything he could do before he was shot. His return to an unimpaired status establishes his role and the role of his group of survivors as whole

and unmarked — the condition that (at least since the nineteenth century, according to Davis and other critics) has traditionally defined what is socially desirable and good, whereas being marked or damaged is morally bad. At first, the living humans who are at the center of the narrative have whole bodies. On the other hand, the undead that threaten their lives are marked, with damaged bodies, often to the point of being appallingly grotesque and gruesome. At the beginning of his graphic novel, then, Kirkman creates a parallel between being marked and being monstrous or evil, while the unmarked bodies of the living humans invite our sympathy; but, before long Kirkman troubles this simplistic identification of the unmarked body with moral rectitude.

Though Rick is impaired only temporarily by the gunshot wound, his body becomes increasingly marked throughout the course of the series. The first major incident occurs in Chapter Three: *Safety Behind Bars*, when Rick beats Thomas after Thomas kills two little girls and attempts to kill Andrea, one of the other key survivors, who was also marked during the attempt. In the process Rick damages his hand terribly, leading Dale to attest, “I think every one of your fingers is broken. Your knuckles are busted all to hell. This ain’t going to heal right at all, Rick ... not even close. I don’t think you’ll be able to use it.”<sup>9</sup> Dale’s prediction proves to be true, and Rick’s injured hand does indeed limit or impair his ability to fend off “walkers,” as the survivors call zombies, because he is now limited to the use of one hand. Later on Dale looks at Rick’s hand again, telling him to make a fist. Rick attempts to, but it is very clear that he is barely able to move it at all, prompting Rick to observe grimly, “That seems to be as good as it gets” (Chapter Six: *This Sorrowful Life*). Despite the seeming permanence of the impairment, it is not clear that Rick’s hand will never heal. This uncertainty revolves around Rick’s slow but gradual return of the use of his injured hand, which promises an eventual return to normal ability. However, in the fifth chapter, *The Best Defense*, Rick becomes permanently marked as the single living character with one hand. The Governor, a psychopathic villain, wants to use Rick and two other survivors as gladiators against other living human beings and zombies, and he is angry that Rick will not disclose the whereabouts of the rest of his group of

survivors; when Rick fights against this tyranny, the Governor chops off his hand. Thus the main protagonist is left with one hand for the rest of the novel series, placing him at a significant disadvantage in the struggle to survive and producing an extremely rare protagonist type in popular culture: an action hero who has a physical impairment.

Making the major protagonist an amputee puts the politics of disability at the forefront of this graphic novel. Because readers sympathize with Rick as the major protagonist, they must also sympathize with what it means to go from being an unmarked body to a marked one. Rick's radical transition is symbolic of the shift in post-apocalyptic human society, which has been left dilapidated and scarred beyond measure. His hand is cut off because, in order to save the lives of his captured fellow survivors, he must act against a lunatic who thrives in the post-apocalyptic world. In losing his hand, Rick becomes a martyr, someone who is willing to stand up for his people despite the risk and danger involved. He also develops into someone who is willing to fight against the morally corrupt. Rick is increasingly the moral center of the story and the character with whom readers identify; to do so, they must identify with the challenges of being impaired.

In Chapter Seven: *The Calm Before*, Rick becomes marked again when the Governor and his group attack the survivors at their shelter, a prison. During this conflict many survivors die, and the Governor's entire group either dies or is never heard from again. Rick is shot through the stomach. While this does not incapacitate him for more than a few days, it does impair him during the ensuing battle between the survivors and the followers of the Governor. Rick is unable to help defend the prison; whereas normally he would lead the defense, he is instead forced to flee and must watch as his wife and baby are killed. The gunshot to his abdomen turns out to be much more serious than first implied: in Chapter Nine: *Here We Remain*, this wound renders him unconscious for days. Rick's son Carl, who is only between ten and twelve years old, protects him from the walkers at this point; without this protection, Rick clearly would die. He recovers, and his abdominal injury is not mentioned again in the series, but it is visually invoked whenever Rick's torso is revealed. This injury to his core marks

his body but does not permanently impair him, whereas his dismembered hand cannot be restored.

While other wounds readily heal in *The Walking Dead*, the loss of a limb is of course permanent.

Any impairment is a serious concern for Rick, who plays a very active leadership role and always puts himself at the front of the fray. Kirkman constantly highlights the seeming paradox or vulnerability of Rick's position as an able leader with a partial disability, particularly in Rick's interactions with other characters. Tyreese warns Rick, "You're disabled, Rick. It's a miracle you made it back to this door, alive" (Chapter Six: *The Sorrowful Life*). Rick argues that he can push walkers out of the way with the stump of his arm and fire his gun with the other; but this assertion does not reassure the reader, as it has already been established in the text that having a close-range weapon in one hand and a gun in the other is the safest, most effective way to battle walkers. Rick sees himself as impaired, since he is still able to function, though not as well as before; however, some of Rick's companions see him as fully disabled, growing increasingly concerned about his ventures into unknown territory where there may be more zombies than he can handle.

Rick's handicap is made very clear when he and Carl barely escape the prison and later need to eat (Chapter Nine: *Here We Remain*). Rick is able to pull out a can of beans from his bag, but he is unable to open it on his own, requiring Carl's assistance. The most prominent male adult character in the whole comic series, the man who leads his fellows against hordes of zombies and other humans, can't even open a can of beans on his own. Rick is at once put in the position of being unable to take care of himself yet being the man in charge, the one most fit to lead his people to safety with his strong morals and vision. It is during this time that Rick and Carl believe that everyone else is dead and that Rick has failed his fellow survivors. Carl does not trust his father to protect him or anyone else anymore, and this lack of trust is reflected in the way Carl assists his father with very few words. His father seems helpless, as he asks for help, as though his needing help is an everyday occurrence; for this requirement of help Carl treats Rick with mild scorn. It is this scene with the beans that it becomes clear that, because of his impairment, Rick cannot survive in the post-apocalyptic world without some

basic forms of physical assistance.

Another stereotype associated with the disabled is that of the pitiful cripple, a stereotype also commonly reproduced during the Victorian period and often found in representations of children such as Dickens's Tiny Tim from *A Christmas Carol* (1843). The idea of pity is something that Kirkman works against in his narrative, because he wants the reader to associate with Rick's qualities, not to feel pity for him; a reader who simply pities Rick as opposed to identifying with his struggle will likely lose interest in this central character. Rick does have a marked body, missing a hand and having a closed wound in his abdomen, but at the same time Kirkman has to represent Rick in such a way that his injuries do not hinder him to the point of making him an object of pity. Moeschen describes marked bodies, such as the one that Rick has, as an "*affliction*, referring to any type of physical (in some cases mental) pain, discomfort, or distress." As such, "[*affliction*] became a common synonym for the disabled, often used in conjunction with words such as *defective* or *deprived*" (438). Ableist culture represents the impaired body as pathetic and pitiful because of the additional challenges a marked person must face and the actions that they are incapable of doing. Kirkman does not want Rick to fall under this category, and so while he does make Rick struggle with the injuries, he also has to make him prevail and be able to perform tasks required of a leader. In this way, between Rick and the zombies he battles there is an uncanny likeness. Even when their bodies are severely dismembered, zombies are a threat; indeed, zombie heads still try and bite people after they have been severed from the rest of the body, and these bites are enough to kill. Similarly, Rick, no matter what injuries he sustains, keeps on fighting, not letting his injuries stop him from protecting his son or the rest of his group, the survivors.

Negan, the major villain in the later volumes of the graphic novel series, sees Rick's lack of a hand as a handicap and, to some extent, is impressed by Rick's fortitude and endurance. Negan decides that he cannot kill Rick because of his missing hand, but he also believes that this flaw makes Rick pathetic trash. Negan's attitude toward Rick demonstrates the fine line between pity and contempt. During combat, he is victorious over Rick, taunting him, "Think I'm going to let some one-handed

piece of shit beat me up – in front of my own men?” (Chapter Eighteen: *What Comes After*). Negan would find it insulting to be beaten by a one-handed man, reinforcing the notion that being impaired makes an individual useless. Similarly, Negan scorns the notion that zombie bodies pose any real danger, only regarding them as a threat if they appear in large groups. Negan implies that Rick, the character associated with disability, is no better than a mindless, disintegrating, shambling corpse. Thus, Negan’s degrading of Rick is not only towards his worth as a human being, but also his ability to lead and fight for what’s right: the virtue Rick stands for most.

*The Walking Dead* works to dispel the stereotype of the disabled as pitiable. Despite all of the moments where Rick struggles to fend off walkers because of his amputation, there are instances where it does not seem to affect him at all. In Chapter Eighteen: *What Comes After*, Michonne comforts pre-teen Carl, who has recently lost an eye, “Your dad is missing a hand. He does just fine.” Michonne attempts to cheer him up and persuade him that a disability does not always have to hold people back from their full potential. While her words do comfort Carl, this moment also says a lot about Rick, who refuses to let his disability decide his fate and continues to be a physically impressive and dauntless force. In Chapter Ten: *What We Become*, Rick and a small part of his group run into a gang of murderers and rapists who want Carl, it is disturbingly implied, in order to sexually abuse him. Even though the rapists have the advantage in numbers, the one-handed Rick chases down these men, seizes a knife from one, and kills them all. Rick is hardly impaired during this scene, but is driven by a force to protect his son, which is always the case when Rick tends to take up action in a super-human fashion. Having one hand causes Rick to struggle in accomplishing his tasks, but when he is needed most, his lack of a hand does not stop him from being a formidable force against walkers and live humans alike.

Rick struggles emotionally with the concept of dismemberment: he hates having to mutilate other human beings, because he sympathizes with what it will mean to live with a disability. He has no problems dealing with the dead or with killing other human beings if necessary, but he resists

deforming the bodies of other human beings. In Chapter Eleven: *Fear the Hunters*, Rick and his core group catch a bunch of cannibalistic human beings who have taken and eaten Dale's remaining leg, as he already lost one in an amputation to save his life. They do not immediately kill this group as they often do to other human beings who endanger them; instead, in an act of revenge, they slowly shoot and cut parts of their bodies off: ears, fingers, and other parts Kirkman did not wish to show. After Dale dies, Rick reveals his disgust with what they did: "I see every bloody bit. Every broken bone. Every bashed in skull. They did what they did, but we mutilated those people." Rick is disgusted by the actions that they took against the hunters, but during the actual action he shows no emotion at all. Rick and his group tortured the hunters for a twisted sense of justice, severing limbs of the hunters to make them know the pain of Dale and the many other stragglers they had caught before; Rick is especially disgusted by how one of the hunters pointed out that children are the most delicious and tender. Rick didn't want to maim the hunters, knowing the pain of having an impairment, but he also didn't want to let the hunters get a clean death either. Another incident occurs later, in Chapter Fourteen: *No Way Out*, in which Carl is being held by Jessie, Rick's lover and a later addition to the survivor's group, while they are surrounded by a hungry horde of zombies. Rick must chop off Jessie's hand so that Carl can escape her clutches and survive; he does not want to sever her hand, but he sees no other option, which later troubles him deeply. In Chapter Fifteen: *We Find Ourselves*, Rick confesses to the doctor:

Ron was scared, he was slowing us down. It was easy for them to get him, he couldn't break free ... they had him, started eating. She just couldn't let go of him. Wouldn't let go of Carl. She was slowing us down, was going to get all of us killed [...] I did what I had to do. What she made me have to do ... She was pulling on Carl. She was scared, she couldn't let go ... they had her. But she was holding us back. I hacked off her hand. There was no other choice.

This experience resonates for Rick because, as he says, “I know what that feels like. I didn’t want to do it” (Chapter Fifteen: *We Find Ourselves*). Rick knows the pain, the struggle, and the suffering involved with losing an extremity, and he does not wish it on anyone, especially someone he cares about, like Jessie.

Carl Grimes, Rick’s pre-teen son, is the main child in the story. The graphic novels often feature moments highlighting the ways in which Carl is growing up, or attempting to grow up, in a post-apocalyptic world. Surrounded by marked bodies, he is destined also to become marked. In the second chapter, *Miles Behind Us*, which is the second season of the television adaptation, Carl gets shot in the chest by a rifle round that goes through a deer. This leads to several surgeries to get all of the bullet fragments out and incapacitates Carl for quite some time. After half a chapter Carl is back to normal as though it never happened; we never see the scar from his wound again and Carl is never incapacitated by it again. This event occurs early in the graphic novel series, when only the walking dead are associated with marked bodies, and the living human beings are depicted as having whole or normal bodies. In order to keep this association constant during the early stages of the graphic novel Carl’s wound heals and is never an issue again.

The normalcy of Carl’s body is only temporary, as Carl suffers the most horrendous of wounds out of any living character in the entire graphic novel’s series. Later in the series, when the town is overrun and zombies swarm the streets, in Chapter Fourteen: *No Way Out*, Douglas starts to get bitten and in his panicked thrashing he accidentally shoots Carl right through the side of his face, blowing away the entire right side of it, including the corresponding eye. After some intensive and immediate surgery, Carl is able to survive, but isn’t awake or responsive until two chapters later, in *A Larger World*. At this time Carl is very bitter about the incident, not wanting to deal with the struggle caused by his missing eye and having a hard time reading because of it. Rick tries to console him, trying to relate with his disability, but Carl sees the two as nothing alike;

don't call it an eye – I don't have an eye there anymore... It's a hole. I have a big giant



hole in my head where an eye used to be. I'm going to call it a hole... You don't know how this feels. You don't know what it's like to see your face in the mirror and think it's gross. You don't know how hard it is to read with one eye... you don't know anything about my problem. You don't know anything about what's happened to me.

(Chapter Sixteen: *A Larger World*)

Carl is upset about the functionality of the eye being gone, complaining that it is harder to read with only one eye; however, Carl is more upset about the visual changes the incident has made in the appearance of his face.

Carl calls the hole in his face where his eye used to be just that, a hole. He doesn't label it according to the feature that is missing, but what it appears to be. More important is how he describes looking into the mirror and feeling disgusted or finding it “gross.” Rick may not be able to relate to the horror of his son's injury, because his hand wasn't left with any revolting features other than its absence; however, Carl's injury is very noticeable and disgusting. It is so repulsive-looking that Carl tries to keep his hair in front of the empty socket. Carl's disgust stems from the visual revolting quality of his injury, which resembles the appearance of marked zombies. As such, Carl can't help but feel that he looks like a monster, disgusting people with the mere sight of his marked face.

The comparison between human and monster transfers directly to the way that Negan views Carl's injury. To the reader it is clear that all of the things he mentions are negative, as they are to the generally sane and normal; however, Negan is a monster, a deranged lunatic who was meant for a zombie-infested kind of world. It is through Negan's view, in Chapter Eighteen: *What Comes After*, that it is made clear just how bad Carl's injury is. Negan responds to Carl's exposed missing eye: “you look disgusting. Have you seen it?! I mean – have you looked in a mirror? I wouldn't blame you if you hadn't [...] I can see your fucking eye socket – your goddamn skull is exposed.” Carl cries at this, as it confirms his thoughts and nightmares about the impression that his appearance will have on

people. Negan exacerbates his insult when he tries to look on the brighter side: “won't be a hit with the ladies, but won't anyone fuck with you looking like that.” This just further confirms Carl’s worries people won’t be able to see past his injury, but will associate him with his deformity over his character. By this, it is made clear that every interaction Carl will ever have again will be affected by the mutilation that happened to his face. Furthermore, Negan’s taunting of the pre-teen Carl is cruelty to an adolescent. Carl is at the age where it is common to start thinking about girls and sex, so by telling him that he will never be sexually attractive is just another fact that Carl doesn’t want to hear.

Carl's injury is by far the most visually horrid of the many disabling injuries. His injury does not affect his ability to fire a gun accurately or fight zombies; however, he struggles in close quarters. Thus, while Carl is still able to function with his impairment, he is vulnerable to his right side, the side which does not have an eye. As a testament to his new vulnerability, Chapter Eighteen: *What Comes After*, Carl almost gets bitten by a walker, but is saved by Michonne. Before the injury Carl was revered as extremely cautious and, possibly, the best-suited for dispatching zombies. Abraham sees Carl as being an ideal survivor, believing that “that kid never seemed to need much watching to me... unless you crossed him. Kid could probably take care of himself better than anyone” (Chapter Seventeen: *Something to Fear*). Despite his deadliness, his injury opens Carl to danger and mistakes. Carl claims that the problem “was my eye... my blind spot. I can hold my own, I would have been fine... I couldn't... SEE it... the one that attacked me. I'm worthless now” (Chapter Eighteen: *What Comes After*). Aside from Carl's weakness of close quarters he is able to overcome many of the capability problems associated with the loss of his eye. Carl is easily able to kill many of Negan's warriors, showcasing just how dangerous and lethal Carl is even with just one eye.

Despite Carl's lethality, he struggles to deal with individuals due to his appearance. In the moment that he reunites with Sophia, another pre-teen survivor, she wants nothing to do with him. Sophia tells Carl that he has grown cold and mean and says that is why she wants nothing to do with him, but she doesn't look at him directly in any of the depictions of that scene either. It is obvious that

she does not want to look at his face and injury. It is the grotesque injury of his face that is the actual reason that she wants nothing to do with him. Negan sees Carl's injury as painful and horrible too, telling him that he should punish Carl for having killed some of his men, but that “truth is, I look at you – and I have a really hard time thinking of any punishment that would be worse than what you've already endured” (Chapter Eighteen: *What Comes After*). Negan believes that there is nothing worse that can be done to Carl than what has already been done, implying that disabling and grotesquely marking the body is worse than anything Negan can inflict on him.

There are two constant major female survivors throughout *The Walking Dead* series. The first of these is Andrea, who quickly matures from an ordinary member of the group into a sharpshooter who is a requisite of the lethality of the group. While she matures in a deadly force her face is prominently marked with a scar, which serves as a symbol of her survival. In Chapter Three: *Safety Behind Bars*, Thomas, an inmate, attempts to cut off Andrea's head; however, she fights back and manages to escape with a deep cut running across her face and the loss of the lobe of one of her ears. While this injury does not disable Andrea or greatly impair her hearing, her reaction to the injury says a lot about the ableist view on marked bodies. While Dale is checking Andrea's face and assessing the damages he ponders if she will lose her hearing or not, because of the location of the wound. Her response to Dale's concern is, “I couldn't care less about hearing. I don't want to look like a freak” (Chapter Three: *Safety Behind Bars*). Andrea sees the loss of ability as preferable over physical disfigurement, even if it isn't nearly as bad as some of her fellow survivors' markings. The limitations of her physical ability is much less than that of her male counterparts, but the fact that she too is marked continues the trend of association of marked bodies with the protagonists of the novel. The longer that the survivors live the more likely they are to be marked and the longer they live the more likely they are to become main characters. As such, as the graphic novel series continues more characters, like Andrea, become marked to varying degrees.

The other main female protagonist is Michonne, who does not have a marked body, but

surrounds herself with individuals who do. Michonne is first seen, in Chapter Four: *The Heart's Desire*, with two walkers, who have been maimed to render them relatively harmless; ironically, these two zombies are actually her “boyfriend and his best friend” (Chapter Four: *The Heart's Desire*). These two zombies have had their arms cut off and their jaws removed, rendering them disabled and harmless. As such, these two zombies are not your average zombies, because they are passive and do not pursue live flesh like less disabled zombies. Michonne explains that her two zombies “stopped trying to attack me a long time ago” (Chapter Four: *The Heart's Desire*), showing how they do become passive without their eating implements. This not only shows that zombies can be disabled and made passive, but it also puts Michonne in the strange scenario of willingly being surrounded by disabled individuals. While Michonne herself is not physically marked, she surrounds herself by those who are, associating herself with that category as well as displaying a comfort with marked entities. In the comic series Michonne finds two lasting friends in Rick and Carl, the two most physically marked of the survivors. As such, Kirkman uses Michonne to display how he wishes popular culture to be comfortable with marked or impaired individuals.

Despite Michonne's normal body, she does suffer dramatically from her new identity in the disabled society. She finds herself unable to deal with people gracefully, telling Andrea that “this isn't me. I can't talk to people anymore. I have no social graces [...] This is not who I am. I used to be talkative and friendly even fun... and I don't think I can ever go back to that” (Chapter Eighteen: *What Comes After*). Michonne has been marked by the circumstances of the zombie apocalypse world and she is the first to admit that she has been changed by it; she finds it easier to chop off the heads of zombies than making small talk with a fellow survivor. It is evident that she has been mentally marked in the fourth chapter, when Andrea finds Michonne talking to herself and not even realizing that she's doing it. She tells Andrea to go away, more comfortable with talking to the dead or imaginary than a living individual. So while Michonne may not, personally, be physically marked, she is mentally marked and surrounds herself with entities who are physically marked.

Additionally, there are a bunch of other characters in Rick's group that also face the challenge of having disabilities. The more marked survivors there are, the clearer it becomes that Kirkman is challenging the ableist culture, which always has able-bodied protagonists. In fact, disabilities and marked bodies are so prevalent in Kirkman's zombie apocalypse that one of the hunters, a group of cannibals looking to eat the survivors as a means to survive, complains "any of them not missing parts? I'm sick of eating leftovers"(Chapter Eleven: *Fear the Hunters*). So many of Rick's group of survivors and, apparently, the random individuals the hunters have encountered, are missing limbs. Kirkman makes it clear that missing limbs and body parts is a normal thing in the zombie apocalypse. This is probably because there are multiple instances where people are bitten by zombies and the initial reaction to these scenarios is to cut the limb off so that the infection may not spread and the person may live. In these instances it is not the zombie who is cutting off any limbs, but they do cause it. Zombies serve as the catalyst for the transformation of the character into a like-state: marked and no longer "normal," just as the zombie apocalypse serves as the catalyst to reproach ableist notions.

The first person to be amputated, Allen, gets bitten on the ankle. Rick chops Allen's leg off just below the knee cap, but he doesn't survive the messy surgery (Chapter Four: *The Heart's Desire*). Later, in the fourteenth chapter, Morgan's arm is bitten. Michonne quickly cuts the limb off with her katana, but Morgan still dies later that day. Despite these two failures, Dale does survive such an amputation. Dale's ankle gets bitten, just like Allen's, and Rick saws off his leg in an attempt to save his life (Chapter Seven: *The Calm Before*). Dale lives, but obviously loses the leg. Despite his impairment, Dale is still able to move about quite nimbly with the help of crutches; however, he is not able to perform physical labor like the other survivors are. After it becomes clear that Dale is going to live the bite and amputation Andrea yells at him, "you're an old man, goddammit! You're slow! You're weak! What the hell were you thinking?! You're not a hero! You don't have anything to prove! You're a useless, pathetic old man! Pathetic! Useless!" (Chapter Seven: *The Calm Before*). Andrea may be seeming to attack the fact that he is old as the reason he is useless, but he was capable of

moving about and using a gun in fending off zombies before the incident; with his loss of a limb he certainly can't do that anymore. Andrea is more angry at the struggles Dale will now face with his disability than actually mad at Dale for anything he has done. So, while Dale is alive and can move around on his own, it is clear that he is now very impaired; Dale used to be able to do a lot of things, like keep watch for the rest of the survivors and fire a gun, but after the amputation all he can do on his own is move around, slowly.

On the other end of the spectrum Glenn gets shot in the leg in Chapter Eleven: *Fear the Hunters*. Although the wound gets treated right away Glenn isn't the same for a long time. Glenn, before the injury, was capable of and used to jumping from building to building in the cities. He was quick and agile enough to not get caught by zombies, even in close quarters; however, after getting shot he doesn't recover for a long time and struggles greatly when attempting to jump from rooftop to rooftop many chapters later. The wound is never shown again, but it certainly limits Glenn's abilities for a duration of time. It is eventually the death of Glenn which triggers the war between Negan and Rick and his group. Glenn is one of the few survivors who is marked and is able to recover back to his normal abilities despite his injury. Negan believes that impairments are to be used as punishments and that people with them are nothing more than garbage. Glenn's return to a normal state of ability defies ableist culture, which is Negan's standpoint. So, when Negan kills Glenn it is symbolic of Negan trying to reinstate the ableist notion by eliminating any proof that opposes his views.

While the protagonists of the story are changing in the graphic novel series, there are also some changes in the form of the antagonists. Some novels shift their antagonists throughout the course of the narrative, changing the circumstances or meaning of the work, but more often to keep the plot complex and interesting. *The Walking Dead* shifts its antagonists on a few occasions, but does so in an entirely different way from other works, including zombie apocalypse narratives. At the start of the graphic novel series it becomes evident very quickly that zombies are the problem and that the goal of the narrative is to survive the zombie infestation spread throughout all corners of the planet. At first, many

characters die from zombie bites. In fact, that's how most people all over the apocalyptic world have died, based on the amount of bites, missing limbs, and injuries induced upon the walking corpses that were once humans. At the start of the graphic novel these zombies, these shambling, marked, and frequently disabled bodies, serve as the main antagonist. Because zombies are the antagonists there is an association between marked and monster; since zombies are so frequently marked, the association between 'bad-guy' or 'monster' is tied up with the connotation of being marked or disabled. On the other side, there are no protagonists with marked bodies at the start of the graphic novel series and it takes a while before any become marked in any lasting manner.

The first four chapters dedicate themselves to prioritizing zombies as the antagonists of the graphic novel series. While the death of Shane, Rick's best friend who threatens to kill Rick, may question the source of danger for a brief moment at the end of Chapter One: *Days Gone Bye*, the rest of the danger comes from the shambling dead. The change in threat, and therefore association, starts to change in Chapter Five: *The Best Defense*, with the introduction of the Governor. The focus of threat not only shifts from the undead to "the much more dangerous, but slightly less prevalent, living. The thinkers" (Chapter 19: *March to War*), but more importantly, a shift from marked to unmarked. This is not to say that the zombies cease to be a threat, but by comparison they are much less dangerous and manageable. Humans are conniving and capable of strategy, whereas zombies are mindless and similar to forces of nature, showing little rhyme or reason and being relatively predictable.

The Governor starts off as normal and not marked; however, as soon as the Governor takes an action that deems him an antagonist, he becomes marked. As the Governor cuts off Rick's hand Michonne jumps on the Governor's back and bites off a large chunk of his ear. The majority of the time the Governor is in the series he is in this state, but it is not the image most recall about the madman. As more is revealed about the Governor the more it becomes clear that the man is evil incarnate, shown by his collection of people's heads. These heads are still zombified and placed in fish tanks as a form of entertainment. In order to continue the stereotypical connection between disabled

and evil, Kirkman has a series of gruesome events happen to the Governor to match his persona; Michonne, after her having been raped and beaten by the Governor multiple times, gets her just revenge by brutally maiming the Governor. She takes a power drill to his right shoulder, rips the fingernails off the fingers of his right hand, cuts his right arm off, blow torches that same arm to cauterize it, rips a spoon through his anus, uses that same spoon to pry one of his eyes out, and finally cuts an artery in his leg. He lives thanks to immediate medical help, leaving him with half an ear missing, one arm, and one eye in addition to a lot of other physical trauma. This deformation of the body is meant to connect the Governor's body to his personality and actions, making him not only act like a monster but look like one too, perfectly fitting the old stereotype of the disabled monstrous character. This state has him visually resemble a zombie, as he is missing limbs and staggering around; however, he is a living and thinking human being. The fact that the Governor is alive and still able, albeit heavily impaired, transfers the source of threat to the survivors from the undead to the slightly less marked human being.

The shift of danger from marked to unmarked begins with the death of the Governor. The introduction of Negan shows that the threat is no longer the marked and impaired bodies of the zombies or other living humans, but the unmarked bodies of Negan and his crew. Unlike the Governor, and especially zombies, Negan is a physical force: tall, strong, and physically unmarked. Furthermore, he is a tyrant, preying on all the groups of remaining survivors<sup>10</sup> and brutally killing anyone who opposes his demands. When Negan is introduced he already has the other two groups of living humans under his thumb, having them fork over half their acquired resources every few weeks. Rick and his group oppose Negan's demands and so he beats Glenn to death to show that he is serious. He also guts other survivors when they show cowardice, brands the faces of his own men when their wives break his rules, kills his own men who oppose his rules, and enjoys killing anyone and anything. Negan is as foul and terrible as anyone can imagine, as he feigns an investment in order and justice in not allowing rape; however, he finds it acceptable to kill women in order to use them as zombie weapons (Chapter



Twenty: *All Out War*). In comparison, zombies are not monsters or all that threatening, which eliminates the connection between being evil and being marked.

The plot of the graphic novel series becomes a political and military resistance to Negan. Most of the men who gather together against Negan's reign are marked or disabled to varying degrees, including some of the members from the other two groups who cave in to Negan's demands. As such, it becomes a war full of marked protagonists against an unmarked enemy. This war culminates the transition of the reader's association with the unmarked to the marked and the impaired, while routing against an able-bodied tyrant. The resistance becomes a representation of impaired individuals fighting to prove that they do not need a handicap or a "normal" person to rule their lives and protect them; impaired individuals can have independence, opposing the way that Negan views impaired individuals.

Negan refuses to kill people who are physically marked, seeing their deformation as punishment enough. Negan refuses to kill Rick due to his missing hand, considering him pathetic for being impaired, and refuses to punish Carl for killing some of his men, after seeing his marked face. Similarly, Negan has a punishment for his many wives when they cheat on him; Negan takes multiple women, former wives of many of his soldiers, and forbids them to see their former husbands. When these women break this rule he punishes the woman by ironing half the face off of the former husband, leaving the man with a marked body. Also, Negan insists that the other groups of survivors need Negan's help. With Rick's group being full of marked individuals, Negan's insistence to help suggests Negan's belief that marked people require aid and protection in order to survive the zombie apocalypse. The political resistance of the impaired is only reinforced by how the survivors who start the movement are full of impaired individuals while the other two allied groups don't have many marked individuals.

The resistance of the marked protagonist is further supported by Dwight's betrayal of Negan. Dwight is one of Negan's lieutenants, one of his main men he trusts to lead in combat matters. The most telling physical feature about Dwight is his ironed face, which leaves one side of his face mutilated with the eye lid seared off on that side. This lack of an eye lid leaves Dwight with the need

to put drops in his eye on a frequent basis. After a few chapters it is suggested that Negan did this to Dwight as punishment. Dwight does not say if his marked face is the reason that he betrays Negan, but he does go out of his way and puts himself in danger in order to take Negan down. He sides with Rick and his group of survivors as an infiltrator who is to step up at the right time and either kill Negan or set Negan up to be killed. The fact that Dwight is the traitor, the one marked individual shown in Negan's crew, who sides with Rick, further supports the resistance of marked individuals towards the able-bodied bad guys. Rick and his group, the marked survivors, may not be without impairment, but they are the good guys and protagonists, whereas the bad-guys are whole and unimpaired.

Robert Kirkman's groundbreaking graphic novel series, *The Walking Dead*, does something revolutionary by giving its main characters marked bodies. Not only does this text change the prevalent characterization Davis has observed in the history of the novel, in which marked individuals are not at the center of the narrative,<sup>11</sup> but it allows Kirkman to subvert ableism as a force in contemporary culture. In Kirkman's graphic novel, it is Negan, the most despicable villain in this text, who embodies the worst excesses of ableism, deriding disabled characters as pitiable and worthless. Instead of portraying Rick and his group of survivors in the novel as pitiful marked characters, he makes strong survivors who do whatever it takes to survive the zombie apocalypse and overcome obstacles many unmarked individuals cannot. These characters are still certainly vulnerable and human, but are not impaired enough to no longer be deemed fit for survival. He makes sure the survivors do not come across as either inherently evil or sympathetic, but as heroic. Kirkman transitions the protagonists from being whole to being marked; he also switches the main source of danger to the survivors from marked entities to whole individuals. These two transitions leave the reader siding with the marked individual and opposing the able-bodied antagonists. The result of these two transitions is the subversion of the hegemonic representations of the hero and heroism in popular culture. The heroes of the story are not the mainstream attractive, muscular, young stereotype, but marked, worn, and brave disabled survivors; instead, their enemies are of the popular portrayal of what a hero should

look like.

Marked bodies have always existed, and they will continue to as long as humans continue to exist. There is no doubt that zombies are used as a catalyst to subvert ableist culture for a reason at this period of time. We live in a scarred world, one marked with the constant threat of terrorism; we have been at war on terrorism for over ten years. The graphic novel series began in 2003, two years after the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks and have been popular since then; *The Walking Dead* phenomenon coincides with the war on terror and the pervasive sense of insecurity, exhaustion, and paranoia that goes with being at war over such a long period. Many soldiers and random victims have returned with missing limbs or severe wounds to their bodies. With the continuation of the War Against Terrorism and events like the Boston Marathon bombing many individuals have lost limbs to random explosives. These events threaten soldiers and civilians alike, creating a sense of insecurity and random danger. The fear of losing limbs to various forms of violence — whether to gunshot wounds or explosive devices — is understandably present in popular culture in recent years, especially given the numbers of soldiers returning from tours in Afghanistan and Iraq with wounds including missing limbs. News stories of their learning to use prostheses and to recover emotionally as well as physically continue to appear. The Boston Marathon bombing of April 2013, in which four people were killed and 62 of people had severe leg or arm injuries (Boston.com), has also brought amputated bodies into the spotlight. News stories continue to appear with inspirational stories about how an impairment does not mean disability, as amputees accomplish great tasks and lead relatively normal lives. It is at this time that these “victims” do not play the role of victim, but partake in challenges just like any other strong and competent athlete; people who are disabled are not allowing themselves to be impaired and are completing marathons and other tasks and being celebrated for doing so.

While zombies may visually remind us of such atrocities, they also defy ableist assumptions; zombies do not allow impairment or disability to stop them, but persist no matter what happens to them. In a society where we increasingly are witnessing the potential for random acts of violence,

including the possibility of dismemberment, audiences derive comfort from characters such as Rick, and from the notion that they can have social value even if such an event is to befall them. Just because someone has lost a hand, an ear, or an eye does not make them any less of a human being than an unimpaired person. Rick and his group comfort readers that even if they are impaired or ever will be that they can still be a hero and can accomplish their goals; Kirkman does not suggest that success will be easy or that trying hard enough will allow you to accomplish anything, but that impairment doesn't mean disability. The protagonists in *The Walking Dead* offer a new representation or model of the action hero, subverting ableist assumptions about leadership, agency, and social value, and actively propagating the notion that impaired individuals still have agency and are just as human as whole individuals.

## Notes

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- 1 Kyle William Bishop produced a graph of the production of zombie films based on the year. The graph shows that there is a large surge at the end of 2006 and the beginning of 2007. See Bishop's *American Zombie Gothic: the Rise and Fall (and Rise) of the Walking Dead in Popular Culture*, p. 14.
  - 2 For further information on the zombie as the Other and its relation to individualism, see Lauro and Embry, and Pulliam.
  - 3 On the origins of the Haitian zombie, see Wade and Bishop.
  - 4 On the zombie as a creature of capitalism, see Webb and Byrmand, Pulliam, and Shaviro.
  - 5 Bishop discusses the zombie in relation to the War on Terror and the fear of possible terrorist attacks, emphasizing that zombie narratives underscore the notion that no one is safe. See p. 9.
  - <sup>6</sup> In *The Walking Dead* graphic novel series, “chapters” and “volumes” are the same.
  - 7 Lennard Davis suggests that eugenics, the science of selective breeding — one result of the research of Charles Darwin — helped stimulate the Victorian interest in seeking ways to prevent deformities. The Victorians saw deformity as devolution. See Davis p. 7.
  - 8 For more on historical constructions of disabilities, see Dolmage.
  - 9 All parenthetical citations from Robert Kirkman’s *The Walking Dead* are from the Image Comics series. Kirkman’s graphic novels do not contain pagination.
  - 10 Besides Rick and his group, there are two other groups of survivors, who are known as the Hilltop and the Kingdom.
  - 11 Lennard Davis suggests that disability rarely appears in the main characters of novels, but rather tends to be dispersed throughout the minor characters. See Davis’s *Constructing Normalcy: The Bell Curve, the Novel, and the Invention of the Disabled Body in the Nineteenth Century*, p. 11.

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