AMC's Infamous Criminal Partnerships: Suppressing the Female Antihero

Melissa Vosen Callens
North Dakota State University
Fargo, ND, USA
melissa.vosen@ndsu.edu

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the limited number of female antiheroes in AMC's critically acclaimed drama series. Using a feminist lens, the author argues that audiences have failed to embrace female characters on AMC as antiheroes, particularly when they are in romantic relationships with male antiheroes, for three primary reasons. First, female characters often challenge binary thinking, and thus, gender role stereotypes. Rather than exhibiting passive, yet nurturing characteristics, characteristics often associated with femininity and motherhood, female characters within the dataset frequently challenge their partners and exert their dominance. Second, writers often fail to fully develop female characters. The absence of their backstories (who they are and what they are thinking) makes it difficult for audiences to relate to and sympathize with these characters. Finally, within the dataset, female characters are rarely viewed as equals in the eyes of their male partners, and the audience takes cues from this treatment. When female characters are childless and/or respected by their male partners, they are more widely accepted as antiheroes.

In this paper, the author examines some of the most famous criminal antihero partnerships in the top-rated AMC series over the last decade: Walter and Skyler White (*Breaking Bad*), Rick and Lori Grimes / Rick Grimes and Michonne (*The Walking Dead*), Don and Betty Draper (*Mad Men*), and Saul Goodman and Kim Wexler (*Better Call Saul*). Following this critique, the broader cultural implications of these representations are offered, particularly the disempowerment of women through motherhood.

Keywords: AMC, antihero, feminist criticism, *Breaking Bad*, *Mad Men*, *The Walking Dead, Better Call Saul*

Despite an increase of male antiheroes in popular culture, the number of female antiheroes is sparse. While audiences celebrate male antiheroes, most female characters who have the potential to become antiheroes are repeatedly met with audience disdain and ridicule. Anna Gunn, the actress who played Skyler White in *Breaking Bad*, wrote an op-ed piece for *The New York Times* on the subject. Gunn argues that while Skyler, like her husband Walt, is morally compromised, she is not "judged by the same set of standards." Gunn argues that the numerous discussion board threads dedicated to discussing the negative aspects of her character on the network's own site were "because Skyler didn't conform to a comfortable ideal of the archetypical female." Gunn is not alone; other female actors whose characters did not conform to certain standards have experienced the same intense hatred on the part of their audiences. Using a feminist lens, I examine AMC's most famous antihero partnerships over the last decade: Walter and Skyler White (*Breaking Bad*), Rick and Lori Grimes / Rick Grimes and Michonne (*The Walking Dead*), Don and Betty Draper (*Mad Men*), and Saul Goodman and Kim Wexler (*Better Call Saul*). These four series were selected because, as of December 2018, they were the top-rated AMC drama series on IMDb; two of them (*Breaking Bad* and *Mad Men*), were named by *Rolling Stone* magazine as the top television series of all time (Sheffield). Following my critique, I offer an explanation of the broader cultural implications of these representations, namely whether female characters can be antiheroes given current binary thinking and how female characters are often disempowered through motherhood.

METHODS

According to rhetoric scholar Sonja Foss, "Feminist criticism involves two basic steps: (1) analysis of the construction of gender in the artifact studied; and (2) exploration of what the artifact suggests about how the patriarchy is constructed and maintained or how it can be challenged and transformed" (169-70). The goal of this analysis is to examine how gender is depicted in the construction of characters, specifically possible antiheroes, in AMC dramas and explore how this construction might explain audience reception of the series and characters.

Through multiple screenings of *Breaking Bad*, *Mad Men*, *The Walking Dead*, and *Better Call Saul*, three themes related to the construction of gender were identified: the absence of traditional markers of femininity in female characters, the lack of backstories for female characters, and the treatment of female characters by their male partners. I, therefore, argue that audiences have largely rejected female characters on AMC as antiheroes, while embracing their male counterparts in this role for several reasons. First and foremost, female characters often challenge binary thinking and gender role stereotypes, or as Gunn states, they do not conform to a widely accepted feminine ideal. Rather than exhibit passive, yet nurturing characteristics, characteristics often associated with motherhood and femininity, female characters frequently challenge their partners and exert dominance. Second, writers often fail to fully develop female characters. The absence of their backstories makes it difficult for audiences to relate to and sympathize with these characters. Finally, female characters are rarely viewed as equals in the eyes of their male partners, and the audience takes cues from this sexist treatment.

ANTIHEROES ON TELEVISION

According to literary theorists, M.H. Abrams and Geoffrey Harpham, the antihero is the "chief person in a modern novel or play whose character is widely discrepant from that which we associate with the traditional protagonist, or hero, of a serious literary work" (14-15). As Jason Mittell, professor of film and media culture, notes, an antihero is "a character who is our primary point of ongoing narrative alignment but whose behavior and beliefs provoke ambiguous, conflicted, or negative moral allegiance" (142-43). Most of

the male antiheroes on widely acclaimed television dramas over the last two decades, such as Tony Soprano of *The Sopranos*, Dexter Morgan of *Dexter*, and Jax Teller of *Sons of Anarchy*, are dishonest and engage in illegal activity. On the other hand, antiheroes in comedies, such as Larry David in *Curb Your Enthusiasm* or George Costanza in *Seinfeld*, are passive and clownish. Despite these questionable qualities, audiences have responded positively to the antiheroes listed above.

The key to antihero status is whether the audience can relate to and sympathize with the character or not. According to Christopher Vogler, author of *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structures for Writers*, "Simply stated, an Anti-Hero is not the opposite of a Hero, but a specialized kind of Hero, one who may be an outlaw or a villain from the point of view of society, but with whom the audience is basically in sympathy. We identify with these outsiders because we have all felt like outsiders at one time or another" (41). Within the dataset, Walt, Don, Rick, and Jimmy (Saul) are morally compromised, yet they have stories that evoke intrigue and sympathy. Walt is fighting cancer; Don is coping with his troubled fatherless past; Rick is fighting to (initially) find his family in the apocalypse; and Jimmy (Saul) is trying to win his brother's approval and prosper as a lawyer. Their female partners, on the other hand, while also morally compromised, frequently have underdeveloped storylines. We know very little about Skyler, Betty, and Lori's backgrounds. As Mittell writes, "Antihero narratives regularly invoke relative morality, in which an ethically questionable character is juxtaposed with more explicitly villainous and unsympathetic characters to highlight the antihero's more redeeming qualities" (143). Not only are Skyler, Betty, and Lori underdeveloped, and thus, unsympathetic characters, but they are also cast as villainous when juxtaposed with Walt, Don, and Rick. The next section summarizes these partnerships.

Breaking Bad

Skyler White is married to Walter White, a high school chemistry teacher diagnosed with lung cancer. In order to provide for his family after he is gone, Walt decides to cook methamphetamine. At first, he does so without Skyler's knowledge, but eventually, she finds out. While initially against Walt's growing drug empire, Skyler ultimately supports Walt and helps launder the money. When Walt's business becomes larger and more and more people die as a result, Skyler is troubled by the increasing violence and threatens to leave Walt, taking the children with her.

Mad Men

Betty Draper is married to Don Draper, a highly-respected creative director for a prominent ad agency in the 1960s. Betty is a homemaker and the mother of Don's three children. Before marrying Don, Betty went to college and had a brief modeling career. Like Walt and Skyler, Don and Betty are both flawed characters. Don drinks all day, and throughout the series, he has multiple affairs. On the other hand, Betty is often unhappy in her suburban lifestyle, and her unhappiness, at times, leads to selfish outbursts.

The Walking Dead

Lori Grimes is married to Rick Grimes, a sheriff from Georgia. After the walker (zombie) apocalypse, Lori has an affair with Shane, Rick's best friend, and deputy, after she believes Rick is dead. She is mother to Carl and Judith, whose paternity is unclear. Later in the series, Rick meets Michonne. Michonne is a mysterious figure, and years after Lori's death, she becomes intimately involved with Rick.

Better Call Saul

Kim Wexler is the girlfriend of Jimmy McGill (also known as Saul Goodman), whom she met while they were both working at a law firm. While Kim was seen at the firm as an up-and-coming star, Jimmy was seen as a clown. Throughout the series, although in slightly different ways, both demonstrate their competency as lawyers. Jimmy has a unique ability to connect interpersonally with his clients, and Kim is highly organized

and detail-oriented. While Jimmy often engages in shady activities to achieve his goals, Kim tends to play by the rules. Despite Kim's nature to follow the rules, on occasion, Kim joins Jimmy in nefarious activities.

The following sections analyze the four series and partnerships described above, exploring the ways in which some female characters are denied antihero status.

CHALLENGING GENDER ROLE STEREOTYPES

According to Barrie Gunter, professor and media research specialist, traits such as "nurturance, dependence, and passivity are typically classified as feminine, while dominance and aggression are generally considered as masculine" (29). In this paper, the female characters examined frequently challenge these gender role stereotypes, which makes it difficult for audiences to relate to, or feel sympathy for, these characters. Ultimately, this makes it difficult for the characters to achieve antihero status. As Mittell explains:

> […] men are more likely to be respected and admired for ruthlessness, self-promotion, and the pursuit of success at any cost, while women are still constructed more as nurturing, selfless, and objects of action rather than empowered agents themselves. This cultural stereotype can yield a backlash against an aggressive, morally questionable female character, who is often viewed as more of an unsympathetic 'ball-busting bitch' than the charismatic rogue that typifies most male antiheroes. (150)

In the series analyzed, Skyler, Betty, Lori, Michonne, and Kim are far from dependent and passive; in fact, they assert their independence and dominance frequently. Additionally, Skyler, Betty, and Lori also have moments of infidelity, and each is criticized by audiences for making such a choice. Michonne and Kim, however, are more widely accepted perhaps because, despite being morally compromised, they remain faithful to their partners.

Passivity

The female characters analyzed frequently express their opinions and assert their independence. Throughout the dataset, most of the female characters are clear they do not need protecting or saving (Skyler, Betty, Michonne, and Kim). For example, as *Breaking Bad* progresses, and Skyler believes Walt has become dangerous, she threatens to take the children. In episode 4.6, Skyler proclaims, "You know what, Walt? Someone has to protect this family from the man who protects this family" ("Cornered"). At this point in the series, Walt is a ruthless killer, yet Skyler stands up to Walt. Audiences, however, despised her for it, creating derogatory memes that circulated the internet. One meme read, "I am not always a bitch / Just kidding I always am" (Chaney).

In *Mad Men*, Betty also exerts her autonomy. After marrying Don, she settles into her role as wife and mother, a common role for women in that era. She, however, becomes bored and restless and is often criticized for this by audiences. In a 2015 interview, January Jones, the actor who played Betty, states, "The first couple seasons, people were very empathetic and felt bad for her and was like 'Poor Betty' and people would come up to me and feel bad for me. Once she left Don and gained her independence and started speaking out for herself, started to empower herself…people hated her" (Rothman). Like Skyler, the more Betty challenged her husband and flexed her independence, the more audiences loathed her. Even when female characters do show dependence, they are often disliked for other reasons, which are explored later in this paper; this is most evident with Lori (*The Walking Dead*). Ultimately, this suggests that female characters, regardless of what they do and how they act, have a difficult time winning over audiences.

Yet there are some female characters within the dataset that do demonstrate autonomy and are not criticized for it, namely Michonne and Kim. For example, in *The Walking Dead*, when Michonne confronts

Heath who believes he knows what it is like to live outside the walls of Alexandria, she states, "Have you ever had to kill people because they had already killed your friends and were coming for you next? Have you ever done things that made you feel afraid of yourself afterward? Have you ever been covered in so much blood that you didn't know if it was yours or walkers' or your friends'? Huh? Then you don't know" ("Thank You"). Michonne is a particularly interesting character because, as a black woman, there are additional expectations that have been placed on her by the audience, by other characters, on how she should perform her gender. One might expect Michonne to be disliked for voicing her opinion, as black women are often portrayed as aggressive when doing so, but this is not the case. She is routinely celebrated for expressing herself. This could be for a variety of reasons, one of which might be the setting, as a zombie apocalypse might evoke different gender and racial dynamics. Another reason might be is that she remains loyal to her group of friends and Rick.

Like Michonne, throughout *Better Call Saul*, Kim is self-reliant. For example, Kim, after being demoted to document reviewer at the law firm, sharply says to Jimmy, "I dig myself out of this hole. You do your job, Jimmy. Prove you can go one week— hell, one *day* without breaking the rules of the New Mexico Bar Association or pissing off your boss. And don't insult my intelligence by saying you are doing any of this for me. You don't save me. I save me" ("Rebecca"). In this scene, Kim makes it clear she disapproves of Jimmy's behavior and can take care of herself. One must ask: why is Kim viewed favorably by audiences? One possible reason is, despite their problems, she remains faithful to Jimmy.

Infidelity

Infidelity is a common theme throughout most of the series examined (*Breaking Bad*, *Mad Men,* and *The Walking Dead*) and is another way in which women resist gender role stereotyping. In these series, all the female characters desire sex, and some have sex outside the confines of marriage. Additionally, they also own this behavior. For example, when Skyler has an affair with her boss, she confidently yells at Walt, "I fucked Ted" ("I.F.T"). She is not apologetic; she is not weepy. After her affair, however, audiences ridiculed her for failing to remain loyal to Walt, despite their marital problems and the legal mess he brought upon the family. Decades later, fans still express their hatred for Skyler, particularly because of her choice to have an affair. For example, in a 2018 YouTube video posted by Screen Prism, one YouTube user wrote, "[…] but i hated skylar [sic] cause she was fake, and also she fucked ted" (carranz). This was not the only comment mentioning the affair; the thread was littered with them.

In *Mad Men*, Don Draper's womanizing was a common thread throughout the entire show, but audiences would often excuse his behavior. On the other hand, Betty was a faithful wife that would often beg for Don to be intimate with her. In season two, Betty cheats on Don, causing an uproar with audiences. In both *Breaking Bad* and *Mad Men*, the men are forgiven, and the women are chastised. This suggests that audiences expect women to be faithful and forgiving. They are expected to support their men.

Interestingly, but not surprisingly, the women that are more widely accepted by audiences— Michonne and Kim—are never unfaithful to their partners. This suggests that audiences hold male and female characters to different standards, particularly in regard to sexual agency. This seems to be true despite the context, be it social locations or time periods. Matthew Weiner, the creator of *Mad Men*, notes this double standard, "There is a strange, traditional double-standard about married women characters that they can't do this. The audience will turn on them in a very violent way if they violate this rule" (Rosen). While this may be one reason why Michonne and Kim are more widely embraced and allowed to step into an antihero role, there are other possible factors, namely, neither have children.

Motherhood and Care

One of the other reasons that many of the female characters struggle to achieve antihero status and are met with audience contempt is because of how creators disempower women through motherhood. The ideas

surrounding motherhood—that one must be nurturing, moral, and caring at *all* times— partially explains the treatment of mothers in the dataset, including why the men in the series are allowed to be unfaithful, but the women are not. TV critic Jen Chaney argues, "[…] Skyler is a mom and all of us are conditioned from birth to see our mothers as our ethical barometers. They're the ones who praised us for saying 'please' and admonished us when we beheaded our sister's favorite Barbie for no particular reason. Moms tell us the difference between good and bad." Audiences hold Skyler, Betty, and Lori to higher standards because they are mothers; they expect them to be the moral compass for all other characters. One of the most prominent examples within the dataset is in *Breaking Bad*. While Skyler is criticized for letting her children grow up in a drug-producing environment, Walt is never criticized for creating it in the first place. Moreover, at one time or another, Skyler, Betty, and Lori are all disparaged for their parenting skills by other characters and viewers. Criticism ranges from not watching children closely in dangerous situations (Skyler and Lori) to ubiquitous disinterest in children (Betty).

Betty is often dismissive of her children, but Don is often altogether absent. In one scene, after a long day with the children, Betty yells at Don, "I'm here, and then you come home and get to be the hero" ("Three Sundays"). After their divorce, Don sees the children even less and only when it is convenient for him. Audiences, however, forgive Don, many arguing that he is not expected to be with his children for extended periods of time, as fathers are were often absent in this era. In Katixa Agirre's focus group study, many participants praised Don's ability as a father; one participated argued, "As questionable and absent a father he can be, he understands his children as children – which is also the main thorn in my side when it comes to Betty. Especially after the divorce, the children are especially vulnerable but Don responds as a father" (12). Clearly, Betty is not afforded that same leeway as Don.

Throughout *Mad Men*, Betty is often judged by audiences by *today*'s parenting standards, a time in which physical punishment is increasingly rare, making her punishments seem unreasonable and cruel. For even self-identified feminists and fans of *Mad Men*, Betty is often listed as one of *Mad Men*'s least favorite female characters. In Monique Bourdage's qualitative study, when participants were prompted to consider the show's historical context (such as noting what punishments were common at that time), they expressed more understanding of Betty and her position (168). Unlike Betty, however, Don is forgiven time and time again—both on the show by a variety of characters *and* by the audience. Jen Kalaidis argues, "If the audience evaluated Betty the [sic] same way they do Don—as a character whose flaws are a largely explained by the era he came of age—it's likely they would view her in a slightly more sympathetic light."

In both scenarios, the fathers are also responsible for the well-being of the children and should show equal interest in them, but when they don't provide adequate care or are disinterested, they are rarely ridiculed. For example, both characters and viewers criticized Lori for refusing to teach Carl how to protect himself from walkers; Rick, however, is relatively unchallenged in season four when he rejects training children to defend themselves.

Ironically, the two times Carl is hurt is under Rick's care; despite this fact, criticism of Rick is again limited. In an interview, then *The Walking Dead* executive producer Glen Mazzara discusses the audience's ridicule of Lori's parenting skills. He believes that most of the criticism is unwarranted. He states, "I don't know if it's plausible that he would always be within her eye line or wouldn't he, like most boys, try to give mom the slip and go out there and get in trouble?" (Ocasio). He also notes that if the audience feels as though Lori should be doing more, they should expect the same from Rick.

Clearly, audiences have different expectations for fathers and mothers. Notably, psychologist Carol Gilligan argues that men, or at least, those with masculine traits, are more concerned with issues surrounding justice, whereas women, or those with feminine traits, are more concerned with issues surrounding care and responsibility. Characters that break these expectations are often disliked, and their caretaking abilities inform

the ways in which their femininity is questioned. For example, while Lori's ability to provide adequate care is questioned, Betty's focus on justice equally elicits criticism. In one episode, in which Sally tries to pick open Don's luggage, Betty mutters to Don, "She's taken to your tools like a little lesbian" ("Out of Town"). She does not ask why Sally tried to break into the briefcase (to keep Don home); rather she is more concerned about Sally acting unladylike and her subsequent punishment. Betty is frequently criticized for the way she disciplines her children. When Sally cuts her hair, an act so blazingly defiant to Betty's eyes, she is furious. While Henry argues that Sally's behavior is normal and suggests a trip to the hairdresser, Betty proclaims, "Reward her? Really?" ("The Chrysanthemum and the Sword"). Later, in the same episode, Sally is caught masturbating, and Betty threatens to "cut off her hands."

It is important, however, to view and interpret Betty's response to Sally within the cultural norms in which Betty was socialized. Just as the audience has certain expectations of how women should act, so does Betty. Betty *believes* that Sally is supposed to look and act a certain way. Sally should not cut her hair, an overt symbol of her femininity, and Sally should not act in, what Betty would deem, an unladylike manner. During her exchanges with Sally, Betty is unaware of the role she is performing (and teaching her children to perform). While audiences clearly dislike Betty for upholding dated gender role stereotypes and heteropatriarchal values, her responses reflect the time period in which the show was set.

The characters who are childless, Michonne and Kim, are free from criticism in this regard. Generally, audiences like Michonne; in fact, after Rick's departure in season nine, some argued that Michonne was the best candidate to lead the show (Tassi). In the ninth season of *The Walking Dead,* Michonne becomes a single parent after Rick's departure. It is too soon to tell how audiences will respond to her. While earlier seasons showed Michonne in a stepmother role to Carl and Judith, she has clearly not been held to the same "maternal" standards Lori was held to earlier in the series. Similarly, audiences are generally fond of Kim, following her career throughout the series. As one critic writes, "We are all Kim Wexler" (McFarland). As a lawyer working many late-night hours, one must wonder if audiences would view her differently if she was a mother.

BACKSTORY: A LIMITED POINT OF VIEW

One reason why audiences have find it difficult to move beyond the binary and gender role stereotypes to embrace messy, morally-compromised female antiheroes is because they simply do not know enough about them. Without knowing a character's backstory and her innermost thoughts, it is hard to relate to them. Mittell writes, "As suggested by *The Sopranos*, alignment and elaboration are key components to our allegiance to an antihero—the more we know about a character through revelations of back story, relationships, and interior thoughts, the more likely that we will come to regard them as an ally in our journey throughout the storyworld" (144). When shows fail to develop female characters, audiences often have a difficult time making a connection with them; without this connection, it is difficult to achieve antihero status.

Skyler, Betty, and Lori are all missing a backstory as each of the series in which they are featured is being told in a way that elicits sympathy for their male partner. In other words, most of these series succumb to what Laura Mulvey calls the male gaze; in each of these instances, the audience perspective is that of a heterosexual male antihero, thus relegating female characters to props or, at times, obstacles. As noted by Megan Cox, "it's hard to build empathy with a character whose internal conflicts are never fully explored—instead, she often seems to just be getting in the way of the story, as another obstacle for her husband." While the audience may get tiny glimpses of how these characters feel, this is rare.

In *Breaking Bad*, the audience sees a man struggling with cancer. They see Walt go to the doctor, go through chemotherapy, get sick from the treatment, and shave his head because he starts to lose his hair. These raw and emotional struggles humanize Walt, and, in many ways, counteract some of the horrific things he

does when growing his methamphetamine empire. Regarding Skyler, audiences don't see many humanizing moments. Much of her onscreen time is spent talking to or about Walt, often, at least in earlier seasons, supporting or reinforcing the audience's sympathetic view of him. Even when Skyler talks to other characters, like with her sister Marie, her focus is on Walt. According to Cox, despite running for 61 episodes, *Breaking Bad* barely passes the Bechdel Test, a test that measures whether a show has at least two female characters that talk to each other about someone/something other than a man. Cox writes, "By this final season, there are now three significant female characters (Skyler, her sister Marie and drug boss Lydia). Skyler and Lydia have shared just one brief interaction with each other, while Skyler and Marie have many conversations over the span of the series. However, the vast majority of their conversations are about the men in their lives […]." Because Skyler does not talk about any other aspects of her life, audiences are unable to relate to her in any other capacity; she is only defined as Walt's wife. Because this is her only defining characteristic, when she disagrees with or challenges Walt, she is seen as being unsupportive and an obstacle.

Additionally, Betty has a limited backstory, and viewers have a difficult time relating to her, as well. During the series, viewers learn that Betty's mother was abusive, and they also learn that Don's father was absent, and his mother was a prostitute. While Don's absent father and prostitute mother are stories explored throughout the series in several different flashback sequences, Betty's relationship with her mother is not done so extensively (only through a few therapy sessions). Don's story is often used as an excuse for Don's behavior, while audiences expect more from Betty despite her own hardships. One of the reasons why audiences may give Don more leeway is because they know more about Don and his story. While some may argue that *Mad Men* is ultimately about Don, it does not mean that female characters, like Betty, have to remain underdeveloped. Viewers eventually learn more about Betty in the final season when she is on her deathbed, but the absence of details up until this point, and not hearing her side of her conflicts with Don really limits the audience's ability to relate to and feel sympathy for her.

Don is also given storylines that show a different side of him, and in which he is able to show compassion. When he discovers his colleague Sal in a compromising position with a male bellhop, he keeps quiet, yet offers Sal a position directing an upcoming commercial. He coyly recommends to Sal to "limit your exposure" as he discusses possible slogans for an upcoming advertisement ("Out of Town"). Betty, however, is not given these storylines; rather the audience continues to see her as a "selfish" mom who often throws tantrums.

As television critic Maureen Ryan points out, for many of these prominent shows, the writers are men, which is one reason why female characters are not fully developed. She writes:

> Television writers, showrunners and executives have been overwhelmingly white, straight and male for decades, and those numbers hardly ever budge. Writers don't write about things that don't fascinate them, and executives generally don't commission scripted shows that don't speak to them on some level. Hence plumbing the depths of experience of women—or gay characters and people of color—just hasn't been a consistent priority for ambitious cable dramas and populist fare alike.

This was the case for many seasons of *The Walking Dead*, as three out of the four showrunners over the past nine seasons have been male (Boucher). This likely had an impact on plot lines and character development. For example, all that viewers know about Lori prior to the apocalypse is that she was awful to Rick, a character they have come to know and love. Lori openly admits, via a flashback, to how poorly she treated Rick without any indication of why she did so. This ultimately limits the ability of the audience to understand her point of view ("Bloodletting").

In *The Walking Dead*, the viewer also knows very little of Michonne's backstory; at one point, viewers learn that she had been married and was a mother. Unlike the other characters, however, her limited backstory

is not held against her. One possible explanation for this is that she "existed" prior to her relationship with Rick, giving audiences the opportunity to get to know Michonne independently of him. She was guarded before she became intimately involved with Rick, and in that regard, the lack of her backstory is her backstory.

Additionally, audiences know more about Kim Wexler. Despite being interconnected with Jimmy's storyline, Kim also has her own. While information about her past is limited, viewers see her move throughout the various stages of her career. For example, they see her quit the first law firm in which she was employed; they also witness her make a compelling and passionate case for her client to follow her, delivering one of the series' most memorable lines, "Either you fit the jacket or the jacket fits you" ("Fifi"). The audience also sees her struggle with her future after many late nights and a serious car accident. Writer for *Salon* Melanie McFarland writes, "Kim is a stand-in for every cubicle dweller who takes pride in working hard and doing a job well but at some point, realizes that it's not doing enough." In other words, the audience can relate to Kim. They are given the opportunity to understand her and her decision-making processes. They are given the opportunity to sympathize with her—and not at the expense of Jimmy.

TREATMENT: A PUNCHING BAG FOR PARTNERS

Finally, female characters are also often mistreated by their male counterparts, and if they are not mistreated, they often mistreat their partners (in the case of Lori), causing the further disdain of their audiences. This treatment can have an effect on the audience and how they feel about a certain character. Mittell writes, "Charisma largely stems from an actor's performance and physicality but it is also cued by how other characters treat the antiheroes, so that on-screen relationships guide viewers how to feel toward a character" (144). Because male antiheroes are often revered by most of the other characters, audiences are more apt to like them.

For example, near the end of *Breaking Bad*, Walt says to Skyler, "And now you tell my son what I do after I've told you and told you to keep your damn mouth shut. You stupid bitch. How dare you?" ("Ozymandias"). There are many times in which Walt and Skyler clash. Derogatory names like "bitch," once used, are simply echoed by the audience. For example, Gunn recalls a fan approaching her at a public event, stating, 'Why is your character such a bitch?'" (Kiefer). Because *Breaking Bad* is Walt's story, and because the audience has not learned enough about Skyler to connect with her, they, too, view her in the same way. Ryan appropriately asks, "Why does it surprise anyone that some viewers feel comfortable heaping scorn on female characters when so many shows treat the women on screen with indifference, confusion or even disdain?"

In *Mad Men*, Betty is a regular punching bag for many of the show's characters. She has been cheated on countless times, a huge measure of disrespect within a marriage. Don lies to her frequently, and though Don thinks Betty is blissfully clueless, she isn't. Betty proclaims to Don, "I'm thinking about how different you are, before and after. I love the way you look at me when you're like this. But then I watch it decay. I can only hold your attention so long" ("The Better Half"). At one point, Betty says to her therapist, "Still, I can't help but think that I'd be happy if my husband was faithful to me. The way he makes love sometimes it's what I want and sometimes, it's obviously what someone else wants" ("The Wheel").

She is not only mistreated by Don. She is also treated poorly by many members of her family. In season seven, after getting into a fight with Sally, Betty is furious. Sally tells her that Betty's only accomplishment is her "pretty nose" and implies that her appearance is the only value she brings to her marriage to Henry. Stewing about Sally's comment, the next time Betty sees Henry, she yells, "I'm tired of everyone telling me to shut up. I'm not stupid. I speak Italian. You're sorry you forgot to inform me what I'm supposed to think. Guess what: *I think* all by myself!" ("The Runaways"). Her frustration is not necessarily misplaced; throughout her marriage to Henry, the viewers see her as arm candy for many political events.

On the other hand, most of the characters, including Rick, treat Lori decently in *The Walking Dead*, although a few of the characters express their disapproval of her when they find out she is pregnant. Interestingly, Steven Yeun, who played Glenn, the character who first finds out about Lori's pregnancy, admitted to hating Lori. He states:

> I remember the first couple seasons, there was a little bit of backlash on Lori. The character Lori. And to me, she was very similar to the character that they wrote in the book. In the book, when I read the book, I hated Lori. But the thing is, is the reason why is because she's coming from her own place which is rational in her mind. But from the outside looking in, it seems irrational. Or it seems disconnected from what you want as a perfect narrative. (Rowles)

Yeun's explanation makes sense. The audience is never given the chance to understand the place Lori is coming from, the place that guides her decisions and behavior. Instead, they are only able to judge her based on other characters' reactions to her. The characters' (and even actors') poor view of Lori is one reason audiences reacted to her with disdain.

This is in stark contrast to how Rick and Jimmy treat Michonne and Kim. Throughout the series, Rick frequently consults Michonne on the decisions he makes, and he regularly tells her that her input is valued. As noted previously, it is possible that an apocalypse influences gender dynamics. Yet, it is important to note that, under these circumstances, Rick treats Michonne differently from Lori, making the comparison appropriate. In episode 9.3, in reference to rebuilding the community in which they live, Rick states, "Thank you for everything you've done" ("Warning Signs"). Like Rick, Jimmy treats his partner with respect. While there are times when he disappoints Kim, he is typically apologetic and repentant for his behavior.

CONCLUSION

There are a variety of reasons why audiences have not embraced many of the female characters as antiheroes in the series analyzed. In part, as Gunn argues, the disdain for these characters has partially to do with how audiences believe women should act. These beliefs are informed by viewers' personal experiences, including what they have learned both consciously and unconsciously about gender performance and performativity. As noted throughout this paper, when female characters do not exhibit traditional markers of femininity, they are ridiculed, as their behavior challenges the notion of a strict gender binary (and thus gender roles). Since gender performativity is a repetitive act that reproduces itself, disrupting the storytelling process and the power within is crucial.

Shifting the narrative, however, is challenging. It is important to recognize that audience expectations, and how those expectations inform the reading of texts, will not change overnight. Expectations are created through agents like popular culture, as popular culture generates and articulates people's understanding of gender. In order to disrupt this cycle, networks should diversify the writers' room and create characters that are admired for moving between masculine and feminine traits.

One way to help change audience perception and increase admiration for diverse female characters is to create more robust storylines. Within the dataset, the female characters often have limited backstories or no backstories at all, and because of this, audiences have a difficult time relating to them; all audiences have to rely on is preconceived stereotypes. A greater focus on female characters in the writers' room would ensure better-developed characters. Specifically, writers should focus on giving female characters moments of redemption as they do with male antiheroes within the dataset. For example, at the end of *Mad Men*, Don finds peace and writes one of the most famous advertisements of the era ("Buy the World a Coke"), while Betty's plans to go back to school are sidelined because she is diagnosed with lung cancer. Despite a series of

misdeeds by both characters, Betty is offered no redemption and is dispensed with a bleak future, while Don finds redemption on both a personal and professional level.

Interestingly, as viewers can see with Kim Wexler and a host of female antiheroes on other networks (Jackie on *Nurse Jackie*, Eve on *Killing Eve*), it is possible for audiences to relate to a resilient and independent female character, who, at times, is morally compromised. As noted in this analysis, one reason Kim is likely treated differently by audiences is that she has a backstory—including moments of redemption— existing outside her partnership with Jimmy. Furthermore, because audiences also take cues from other characters in a series, it is important that other characters treat female characters with respect. When these characters, especially their partners, treat them poorly, audiences are more apt to dislike them. Notably, Jimmy treats Kim with respect.

It is clear that over the years, AMC has been trying to create strong representations of women, women who have their own opinions and are not afraid to voice them. Yet, despite this, such representations rely on stereotypes and adhere to a gender binary. Unfortunately, the lack of female backstories and the poor treatment of these characters by other characters is clearly causing a disconnect for audiences, at times, fostering contempt. Additionally, I would argue that while Kim and Michonne achieve antihero status, there is still cause for concern. Kim is childless, and for a good percentage of the series, so is Michonne. On its own, this is not problematic, but it is problematic that viewers have yet to see a widely embraced antihero *mother* on AMC, as such characters are repeatedly disempowered via motherhood. This suggests ways in which the network can improve and develop a diverse range of audience-accepted female characters who can fully function as antiheroes.

WORKS CITED

Abrams, M.H., and Geoffrey Harpham. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Cengage Learning, 2011.

Agirre, Katixa. "'Am I Supposed to Say how Shocked I Was?' Audience Responses to *Mad Men*." *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 17, no. 6, 2014, pp. 631-646, doi:10.1177/1367549414544115. Accessed 29 Mar. 2019.

"The Better Half." *Mad Men*, season 6, episode 9, AMC, 26 May 2013.

"Bloodletting." *The Walking Dead*, season 2, episode 2, AMC, 23 Oct. 2011.

Boucher, Ashley. "'The Walking Dead:' A Brief Showrunner History." *The Wrap*, 3 Feb. 2018, https://www.thewrap.com/the-walking-dead-showrunners/. Accessed 2 Nov. 2018

Bourdage, Monique. "Not Just 'Another Humourless Bitch': Feminist Fans' Reception of *Mad Men*." *Continuum*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2014, pp. 164-175.

carranz, j. "[…] But I Hated Skylar Cause She was Fake…." YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N-YtnuYKdqc. Accessed 15 May 2019.

Chaney, Jen. "Why You Hate Skyler White." *Esquire*, 5 Sept. 2013, https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/tv/a24645/why-you-hate-skyler-white/

"The Chrysanthemum and the Sword." *Mad Men*, season 4, episode 5, AMC, 22 Aug. 2010.

"Cornered." *Breaking Bad*, season 4, episode 6, AMC, 21 Aug. 2011.

Cox, Megan. "Why Do Many 'Breaking Bad' Fans Love Walter White But Hate Skyler?" 25 Sept. 2013. https://bitchmedia.org/post/why-do-many-breaking-bad-fans-love-walter-white-but-hate-skyler. Accessed on 3 Nov. 2018.

"Fifi." *Better Call Saul*, season 2, episode, 8, AMC, 4 April 2016.

Foss, Sonja K. *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice*. Waveland Press Inc., 2004.

Gilligan, Carol. *In a Different Voice*. Harvard University Press, 1982.

Gunn, Anna. "I Have a Character Issue." *The New York Times*, 23 Aug. 2013, p. A21.

Gunter, Barrie. *Television and Sex Role Stereotyping*. John Libbey & Company, 1986.

"I.F.T." *Breaking Bad*, season 3, episode 3, AMC, 4 Apr. 2010.

Kalaidis, Jen. "The 'Mad Men' Double-Standard: Why Do Fans Hate Betty but Love Don?" *The Atlantic*, 23 Mar. 2012, https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2012/03/the-mad-men-double-standard-why-do-fans-hate-betty-but-love-don/254924/. Accessed 2 Nov. 2018.

Kiefer, Halle. "*Breaking Bad*'s Anna Gunn Looks Back on All the 'Bizarre' Fan Hate SheReceived as Skyler White." Vulture, 1 July 2018, https://www.vulture.com/2018/07/breaking-bads-anna-gunn-looks-back-on-bizarre-fan-hate.html. Accessed. 11 March 2019.

McFarland, Melanie. "We : Are All Kim Wexler: 'Better Call Saul' and the Painful Realities of Mid-Career Crisis." *Salon*, 2 Sept. 2018, https://www.salon.com/2018/09/02/we-are-all-kim-wexler-better-call-saul-and-the-painful-realities-of-mid-career-crisis/. Accessed 2 Nov. 2018.

Mittell, Jason. *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*. NYU Press, 2015.

Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*. 5th ed. Eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen. Oxford UP, 1999: 833-44.

Ocasio, Anthony. "'The Walking Dead' Producer Responds To 'Annoying Lori' Critics." *Screen Rant*, 21 Mar. 2012, https://screenrant.com/walking-dead-season-3-lori-annoying/. Accessed 2 Nov. 2018.

"Out of Town." *Mad Men*, season 3, episode 1, AMC, 16 Aug. 2009.

"Ozymandias." *Breaking Bad*, season 5, episode 14, AMC, 15 Sep. 2013.

"Rebecca." *Better Call Saul*, season 2, episode 5, AMC, 14 Mar. 2016.

Rosen, Lisa. "'Mad Men' Stars Remember Biggest Bombshells Hurled at Them on Series." The LA Times, 28 May 2015, https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/envelope/emmys/la-en-st-mad-men-20150528-story.html. Accessed 28 Mar. 2019.

Rothman, Michael. "'Mad Men': Shocking Way Fans Treated January Jones Because of Betty." *ABC News*, 4 Apr. 2015, https://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/mad-men-shocking-fans-treated-january-jones-becaise/story?id=30087418. Accessed 2 Nov. 2018.

Rowles, Dustin. "Glenn from 'The Walking Dead' Hated Lori as Much as Everyone Else." *UpRoxx*, 15 July 2015, https://uproxx.com/tv/glenn-from-the-walking-dead-hated-lori-as-much-as-everyone-else/. Accessed 2 Nov. 2018.

"The Runaways." *Mad Men*, season 7, episode 5, AMC, 11 May 2014.

Ryan, Maureen. "Anna Gunn and 'Breaking Bad's' Skyler White: Just the Tip of a Very Big Iceberg." *Huffington Post*, 25 Aug. 2013, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/maureen-ryan/anna-gunn-breaking-bad-skyler-white_b_3810989.html. Accessed 2 Nov. 2018.

Sheffiled, Rob. "100 Greatest TV Shows of All Time." *Rolling Stone*, 2016 Sept. 21, https://www.rollingstone.com/tv/tv-lists/100-greatest-tv-shows-of-all-time-105998/taxi-110398/. Accessed 2 Nov. 2018

Tassi, Paul. "When Rick Dies in Season 9, 'The Walking Dead Should Too." *Forbes*, 30 May 2018, https://www.forbes.com/sites/insertcoin/2018/05/30/when-rick-dies-in-season-9-the-walking-dead-should-too/#6a9f0cae1cd8. Accessed 2 Nov. 2018.

"Thank You." *The Walking Dead*, season 6, episode 3, AMC, 25 Oct. 2015.

"Three Sundays." *Mad Men*, season 2, episode 4, AMC, 17 Aug. 2008.

"Warning Signs." *The Walking Dead*, season 9, episode 3, AMC, 21 Oct. 2018.

"The Wheel." *Mad Men*, season 1, episode 13, AMC, 18 Oct. 2007.

Vogler, Christopher. *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structures for Writers*, 2nd ed. Michael Wiese Productions, 1998.

AUTHOR BIO

Melissa Vosen Callens is currently an associate professor of practice in instructional design and communication at North Dakota State University, Fargo. Her areas of research and teaching interest include Popular Culture and Online Education. Her writing can be found in The Ultimate Walking Dead and Philosophy, English Journal, Communication Teacher, Hollywood Heroines: The Most Influential Women in Film History, and A Sense of Community: Essays on the Television Series and Its Fandom, among other publications.

SUGGESTED CITATION:

APA

Vosen Callens, M. (2019). AMC's infamous criminal partnerships: Suppressing the female antihero. *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy*. 6*(2)*. http://journaldialogue.org/issues/v6-issue-2/amcs-infamous-criminal-partnerships-suppressing-the-female-antihero/

MLA

Vosen Callens, Melissa. "AMC's Infamous Criminal Partnerships: Suppressing the Female Antihero." *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy,* vol. 6, no. 2. Retreived from journaldialogue.org/issues/v6-issue-2/amcs-infamous-criminal-partnerships-suppressing-the-female-antihero/