A Zombie Apocalypse: Opening Representational Spaces for Alternative Constructions of Gender and Sexuality

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Summary

Zombies have become an increasingly common figure in contemporary cultural landscapes around the world and South Africa is no exception. While scholars have tended to shy away from engaging with post-apocalyptic zombie fiction, this has started to change as it became apparent that these texts offer rich possibilities for exploring alternative constructions of gender and sexuality. In the aftermath of an apocalypse, most forms of social organisation and ideological constructions are decimated and survivors are able to imagine new ways of constructing sexual and gender identities as they go about reconstituting their social worlds. By means of a feminist literary analysis of Lily Herne's *Deadlands* (2011) and *Death of a Saint* (2012), this article explores whether these zombie texts successfully capitalise on the post-apocalyptic social ruptures in terms of their representations of gender and sexuality. It emerges that, although the texts do suggest alternative constructions, they also reinscribe and reify traditional patriarchal and heteronormative binaries.

Opsomming

Zombies word al hoe meer algemeen in eietydse kulturele produkte aangetref. Die toenemende gewildheid van die zombiefiguur is 'n wêreldwye verskynsel, en Suid-Afrika is geen uitsondering nie. Navorsers was geneig om weg te skram van post-apokaliptiese zombie-fiksie. Dit het egter begin verander soos dit algaande duidelik geword het dat hierdie tekste 'n rykdom moontlikhede bied vir die verkenning van alternatiewe konstruksies van *gender* en seksualiteit. Na die apokalips is die meeste vorme van sosiale organisasie en ideologiese konstruksies vernietig, en oorlewendes kan dus nuwe maniere bedink om seksuele en *gender*-identiteite te konstrueer terwyl hulle hul sosiale wêrelde herbou. Deur middel van 'n feministiese letterkundige analise van Lily Herne se *Deadlands* (2011) en *Death of a Saint* (2012), verken hierdie artikel of dié zombieromans daarin slaag om die post-apokaliptiese ontwrigting te benut in terme van hul uitbeelding van *gender* en seksualiteit. Dit blyk dat, alhoewel die tekste alternatiewe konstruksies voorstel, hulle steeds ook tradisionele patriargale en heteronormatiewe binêre konstruksies in stand hou.

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Peter Dendle (2007: 54) argues that "[p]ost-apocalyptic zombie worlds are fantasies of liberations" in which groups of survivors frequently attempt to navigate their way through terrains where most forms of social organisation and ideological constructions lie in ruin. There has been a veritable revival in zombie-related cultural products over the course of the last decade. Zombies have infested everything from the literary canon (Jane Austen's classic texts are now available as *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies: Dawn of the Dreadfuls* and *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies: Dreadfully Ever After*) to films by critically acclaimed directors (e.g. *28 Days Later*, directed by Danny Boyle) and immensely popular video games (e.g. *Bogus Dead, Zombie Commandos from Hell*). Even a cursory glance at the contemporary cultural landscape confirms that zombies are having a moment. A number of critics have suggested reasons for this increased popularity. June Pulliam (2007: 724) contends that zombies are "a malleable symbol – representing everything from the horrors of slavery, white xenophobia, Cold War angst, the fear of death, and even apprehensions about consumer culture". Dendle (2007: 45) explains that zombies articulate current social anxieties in contexts that are "marked by concerns over environmental deterioration, political conflict, the growth of consumer capitalism, and the commodification of the body in contemporary biomedical science" (see also Stratton 2011; Keebaugh 2013). This is also the case in South Africa, where Penguin started publishing Lily Herne's Mall Rats series in 2011. Lily Herne is a pseudonym for Sarah Lotz and her daughter Savannah. *Deadlands* (2011) and *Death of a Saint* (2012) focus on a group of young survivors who form a fledgling resistance movement after Cape Town is decimated during a zombie apocalypse. In her overview of significant South African and Zimbabwean literary publications for the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, Crystal Warren (2012: 581) refers to *Deadlands* as South Africa's first zombie novel and she notes that it "has been highly praised" and that it offers "an intriguing and entertaining mix of science fiction, adventure and social commentary". The third book in the series, *Army of the Left*, has not yet been released. While a few scholars have noted this "resurgence" (Lauro & Embry 2008: 85) of zombies in American, British and European contexts, little academic work has been done on the rich representational spaces that such texts have opened up for alternative constructions of gender and sexuality. In terms of scholarly engagement with South African literary manifestations of this cultural phenomenon, even less research has been done. Yet, Marcia England (2006: 353) reminds us that, in such texts, "boundaries dissolve and create potentially progressive moments which can disturb gendered norms and binaries". This article offers a feminist literary analysis of *Deadlands* and *Death of a Saint* to ascertain whether Herne capitalises on the "progressive moments" (p. 353) that these zombie texts create in terms of their representation of gender and sexuality. Herne makes it clear that the remnants of this post-apocalyptic society are unequivocally

South African. For instance, one of her characters wryly notes that "South Africa must be one of the best countries in the world for surviving a zombie apocalypse" because it is "full of security estates and high fences" (Herne 2012: 173). While intertextual references to classic Hollywood zombies abound, the characters are located in a South African context. My analysis will demonstrate that this location is crucial to understanding the ways in which gender and sexuality are reimagined in this brave new world. In addition, I will show that, although the texts do suggest alternative constructions, they also reinscribe and reify traditional patriarchal and heteronormative binaries.

Although Warren (2012: 581) praises *Deadlands* for "attracting audiences beyond the teenage market", the Mall Rats texts are marketed as young adult fiction. Like zombie fiction, young adult fiction has tended to escape the notice of scholars. Even the designation "young adult fiction" is a contentious one, as this subgenre has variously been referred to as "teen fiction", "children's literature", "adolescent literature" and "juvenile fiction". The term "young adult fiction" is the commonly accepted moniker in contemporary research, partly because it avoids the condescending connotations of immaturity that accompany terms such as "teenage" and "juvenile" (see Frey & Rollin 2004; Cole 2009). In recent years, critics have started exploring the rich possibilities presented by these texts, particularly in terms of their representations of gender and sexuality (see Hayn & Kaplan 2012; Rockefeller 2007; Cart & Jenkins 2006). Laura Robinson (2009: 205) contends that "young adult fiction is often about the individual's troubling relationship to the norms of the greater society" and she singles out gender as "one of the significant regulatory regimes that causes conflict in children's and young adult fiction". Lisa Goldstein and Molly Phelan (2009: 33) similarly find that "[f]iction for young adults is increasingly concerned with gender and sexuality".

Pulliam (2007: 724) argues that, since a salient trait of zombies is their "lack of free will", they tend to be "flat characters" and "are generally not the protagonists of the stories about them" (for more on zombie fiction and cinema as a subcategory of the horror genre, see Boelderl & Mayr 1995; Bishop 2008, 2009). Kyle Bishop (2006: 201) confirms that "the zombie is completely and thoroughly dead – it is essentially a walking corpse". Zombies are devoid of cognitive processes, consciousness and speech. The zombie is, in other words, "purely a creature of blind instinct" (Bishop 2006: 201). In addition, zombies "tend to congregate over time", and they feed on human flesh (Jankowski 2011). After the zombie apocalypse, in Herne's fiction, South Africa becomes what is called a "Resurrectionist state". The Resurrectionists are a sect that worship the dominant Guardians, since they appear to have the power to protect surviving humans from the zombies. The corrupting influence of power soon becomes apparent in the novel and the oppressive rule of the Resurrectionists and Guardians is represented as even

more sinister than the threat posed by the zombies. Jeff May (2010: 289) identifies this as a common trope in zombie fiction as the boundaries between "us" and "them" tend to become porous and the "actions and behaviours of the undead and the living achieve a shocking ambiguity". He notes that "[o]ften, the most brutal actions are committed not by the zombies, but by the living" (May 2010: 289). Although we are presented with different levels of zombification in the Mall Rats novels, the main protagonists are a group of young, human, adults. They are Lele, Saint, Ash and Ginger. In *Death of a Saint*, they have become outlaws and they are wanted "for crimes against the Resurrectionist state" (Herne 2012: 7). Interestingly, the "Wanted" poster we find in the opening section of the novel offers descriptions that pointedly avoid reference to the protagonists' gender. The poster is a layered text which self-referentially comments on the ubiquity of the gender binary while simultaneously erasing gender from the characters' descriptions. The readers are provided with each person's name, age, nationality and a brief description. Lele is described as a 17-year-old South African with "short (possibly shorn) hair", Saint is a 19-year-old Motswana with "unruly hair" and a fondness for using "chains and fire as weapons", Ash is a 20-year-old South African with "longish black hair", and Ginger a Brit of unknown age with red hair, who carries a chainsaw.

According to Steve Jones (2012: 2), the "zombie is a disruptive figure that has been interpreted by scholars as denaturalizing norms, calling fundamental aspects of our social relations into question". Jones (2012: 11) reminds us that binary oppositions, such as those between male and female, fantasy and reality, life and death and normal and abnormal, are "constructed illusions" and that "their stability is a façade sustained by reiteration". When the zombie outbreak unsettles the gender codifications that structured pre-zombie reality, novels such as these reveal the inherent instability of these social constructions. The absence of gender markers in the "Wanted" poster suggests that these characters are resistance fighters first, and gendered beings second. In *Deadlands*, however, we meet these characters as young men and women. The spaces that opened up because of the zombie apocalypse allow them more room within which to manoeuvre as they negotiate their gender and sexual identities. Yet, as relentless as the bloodthirsty zombies are, so persistent do assumptions about gender appear to be. Even though the bulk of the analysis will focus on the "human characters" in the novels, Rhona Berenstein (1996: 5) explains that the mere presence of a monster can be sufficient to disrupt gender codes. She elaborates on this point as follows:

> It is as if the fiend's toying with ... elements that usually remain separate, such as male and female gender traits, force or invite human characters to cross boundaries as well ... it is also a generic space in which human characters, male and female, behave monstrously and transgress the social rules and roles that usually confine them.
>
> (Berenstein 1996: 5)

The indeterminacy of the zombies' gender is reflected in the use of the "it" pronoun when the characters refer to them. In one description of a zombie, Lele notes: "It shook its head from side to side as if it was trying to see out of the empty holes that once held its eyes, and then it bent its neck right back and let out a totally inhuman moan" (Herne 2011: 135). In this extract, the zombie is represented as neither gendered nor human. In the same novel, Lele notices a group of zombies and reflects that they "looked to be mostly male, although it was difficult to be sure as most of them were in a bad way – clothes rotted through, the flesh dried on their bones like biltong, their hairless heads looking way too large for their skeletal bodies" (p. 203). It seems that the more zombified and inhuman the creatures grow to be, the more indefinite their gender roles become. Or, if one reverses the direction of causality, the more blurry the gender definition becomes, the more monstrous the zombies appear to be. According to Paul Beidler (2006: 33), monstrosity "denotes a grotesque hybridity". Dana Oswald (2010: 2) describes "gender hybrids" as "creatures that challenge the integrity of the sexed and gendered body" (see also Baldick 1987). Robert Rawdon Wilson (2000: 257) explains that, when "the human person's boundaries (such as gender) break down in a horror narrative, he or she becomes monstrous in some sense". These dynamics operate by "calling into question all definitions, all accepted formulas, concerning human personhood" (Wilson 2000: 257). Gender is a fundamental formula in our understanding of what constitutes "human personhood". Judith Butler (1990: 190) confirms that "[d]iscrete genders are part of what 'humanizes' individuals within contemporary culture". When someone can no longer be identified as a "she" or a "he" and slips into the realm of being an "it", this presents such a profound challenge to our sense of what it means to be human that it is associated with monstrosity (for an example of a text that manages to avoid both gender descriptors and a slippage into monstrosity, see Jeannette Winterson's *Written on the Body*, 1993). Lele's first description of a zombie clearly focuses on the inhumanity and monstrosity of its "maggoty, decaying flesh" (Herne 2012: 6): "something scrabbled around its [an overturned taxi's] side, something with raggedy grey limbs and a skull that seemed to be made up of nothing but yellow teeth and dark eyeholes" (p. 7). She continues to describe how the "thing moved in rapid, jerky gestures ... crawling on all fours, jaw gaping impossibly wide, a ghoulish moan coming from its throat" (p. 7).

Once the text has firmly established the monstrosity of the zombies that hover menacingly in the background of the plot, the attention shifts to how

the human characters are surviving. The reader is immediately alerted that constructions of gender will be challenged in the novel. After the death of her grandmother, Lele and her brother Jobe move to the city enclave of Cape Town to go live with their father and stepmother. The stepmother's name is Cleo Mbane, but Lele refers to her as the Mantis, because of her "bulbous eyes, spindly limbs and general twitchiness" (p. 4). It is very clear that Cleo is the stronger partner in this marriage, and Lele grudgingly admits that she was "supposed to be a great war hero and everything" (p. 8). Unlike most of the other city residents, they live in a "brick-and-mortar" home that is part of a "privileged housing" (p. 9) scheme. They have access to this relatively higher standard of living only because of Cleo's "high-powered job at the embassy" (p. 9). Cleo takes charge as Lele notes of her father that "as usual, he was lost in his own world" (p. 4). While most people seem to agree that Cleo is a "brave woman" (p. 177) who was part of a "small band of diehard War veterans who had fought the Rotters [zombies] till the end", Lele has slotted her into the role of the wicked stepmother. Elizabeth Church (2000: 2) argues that images of stepmothers as forceful, vengeful and envious are "widely circulated and deeply instantiated" in contemporary cultures. In her study of common sexist stereotypes of women, Jean Gaddy Wilson (1997: 47) describes one particularly persistent construction as follows: "Ugly stepmother/bitch: woman as non-nurturer. Examples: Iron Maiden, aggressive woman, aloof executive". Lele's derogatory references to Cleo are distinctly gendered and she draws on very traditional misogynist discourses to justify her dislike of her stepmother. She calls her an "A-grade bitch" (p. 8) and she notes: "For the thousandth time I tried to figure out what it was Dad saw in her" before coming to the conclusion that "[i]t couldn't be her looks" (p. 4). Regardless of all Cleo's accomplishments, Lele dismisses her as an ugly bitch. In her groundbreaking text, *The Beauty Myth*, Naomi Wolf (2002: 10) explains that the "more legal and material hindrances women have broken through, the more strictly and heavily and cruelly images of female beauty have come to weigh upon us". Even more worrying from a feminist point of view is the fact that these beauty expectations are perpetuated by another woman. A further concern is the extent to which "[c]ompetition between women has been made part of the myth so that women will be divided from one another" (Wolf 2002: 14). Older women and beauty are considered to be mutually exclusive "since women grow more powerful with time, and since the links between generations of women must always be newly broken: Older women fear young ones, young women fear old, and the beauty myth truncates for all the female life span" (Wolf 2002: 14). Lele is so busy demonising Cleo with her cruel nickname of the Mantis that it takes her until the second instalment of the series to realise that Cleo is, in fact, on the same side since she is part of the resistance movement called ANZ. While the Resurrectionists represent the patriarchal and hetero-

normative majority, ANZ is an underground organisation that tries to challenge their pervasive power.

In an analysis of the gender politics in zombie cinema, Stephen Harper (2007: 7) argues that by representing women as "active, violent agents", such "images destabilize gender representations" by demonstrating that "femininity is both dynamic and potent". With her preference for army boots, shorn hair and her combat training, Lele's character presents such an alternative image of femininity. However, it is not possible to claim her as a feminist hero in any simplistic manner. Kathryn James (2009: 136) issues the important caution that, in order to make a substantive "difference to gender representation ... gendering must be considered at the level of both story and discourse". It is, in other words, not merely about "reformulating gender schemata in relation to participants' roles or actions" (Stephens 1996: 20). In her research on the female protagonist in another work of young adult fiction, James (2009: 137) finds that "a closer reading demonstrates that the narrative's affirmative account of female agency and subjectivity is undermined by a number of tensions and contradictions". This is also very much the case when one interrogates entrenched constructions of gender and sexuality in *Deadlands* and *Death of a Saint.* The animosity between Lele and Cleo, which can at least partially be traced back to Lele's internalisation of the beauty myth, crops up again in *Death of a Saint* when the group meets a young woman called Megan. Megan is represented as very beautiful, and Lele almost immediately regards her as a competitor for Ash's affections. When observing them together, she notices: "I don't miss his eyes moving to follow Megan as she makes her way effortlessly back to the main platform", and she finds herself "smother[ing] another stab of anxiety" (Herne 2012: 168). Lele blames Megan for attracting Ash, rather than focusing on Ash's apparently fickle attraction to her. When Megan bends down to cuddle a pet, Lele judges her for "giving [them] all a good look at her chest as she does so" (p. 166). During a later trip in a bakkie [pickup truck], Lele literally positions herself between Megan and Ash in order to prevent Ash from being exposed to Megan's seductive presence. Lele's jealously has caused her to dislike Megan, but she accepts an offer to sit in front in the bakkie's cab with her because she "couldn't think of a way to politely turn her down" (p. 170). Her reflections about this are especially revealing: "Besides, as the car bumps along the road and my thigh brushes up against Megan's, I'm glad it's me and not Ash sitting between the two women [Megan and her adoptive mother]" (p. 170). Lynne Henderson critiques the often

> unexamined belief that men are not morally responsible for their heterosexual conduct, while females are morally responsible both for their conduct and for the conduct of males. Indeed, men are entitled to act on their sexual passions, which are viewed as difficult and sometimes impossible to control; this belief also says that women should know this and avoid stimulating them if they do not wish to have sexual intercourse.
>
> (Henderson 1992: 130-131)

It sounds as if Lele is reading from the script of what Henderson (1992: 164) calls "the male innocence/female guilt story" when she describes Megan as everything she herself is not: "curvy, cheerful, long-haired. *I wouldn't blame Ash* if he did prefer her. Who wants a skinny, moody, sulky girlfriend when you can have one who smiles all day and handles a car like a racing driver" (Herne 2012: 204; my italics). When she confronts Megan about "flirting with him non-stop" (p. 297), and a stunned Megan asks her what she is talking about, Lele portrays Megan as a calculating and manipulative seductress: "'Oooh! You fancy a swim, Ash?' I say, putting on a little girl voice. 'Oooh, Ash, look at me in my see-through T-shirt'" (p. 297).

It is the other female member of the group, Saint, who tries to convince Lele that Megan will be able to make a valuable contribution to their resistance struggle. Since Saint is a lesbian, it seems that she is only able to see Megan clearly because she is not competing against her for the attention of the male group members. However, because of Megan's beauty and generally genial demeanour, Saint also has to overcome a few prejudices before she could appreciate Megan. She admits that when they first met Megan, she "thought she might be a breezy, shallow girl like the ones [she] used to know ... girls who didn't seem to worry about anything other than boyfriends and clothes and how many children they were planning on popping out" (p. 196). It is only later that she realises that Megan is "smarter and more resourceful than she looks, and it must have taken some guts to leave her home". Saint also appears to be associating traditional markers of femininity with frivolity. Megan is deemed to be acceptable despite being a so-called girly girl. Edwin Battistella (2006: 104) explains that "[*g*]*irly* has long been used to refer to things that are youthfully feminine, as in *girly colors* or *girly dresses*" and the phrase "girly girl" is "used to describe girls who embrace the traditional and stereotyped girlish values and desires". While the so-called girly values such as enjoying clothes and prettiness are not in themselves necessarily problematic, Battistella (2006: 105-106) reminds us of "the well-known content asymmetry that encodes *manly* as representing properties of vigor, strength, and toughness and that encodes *girly* as representing softness and weakness". Resourcefulness, intelligence and courage are not qualities that Saint associates with feminine women like Megan. In a reference to Lele in *Deadlands,* Saint reveals her cognitive connection between courage and masculinity when she asserts that it "would take balls of steel to walk through all the zombs around here" (Herne 2011:

136). Her connection of femininity and frivolity is also signalled when, after a close escape from a group of zombies, she notes that they need to leave quickly. Lele, who is new to the group, asks where they are going, and Saint responds: "Back to the enclave of course. Where else? The nail salon?" (p. 123). Megan is assumed to lack these attributes until she proves otherwise. In terms of the politics of appearance, women are still located in a no-win situation: if they are not stereotypically feminine, they are labelled as an unfeeling bitch, as Lele labels Cleo, and if they are, they are dismissed as frivolous at best, and as a calculating threat at worst.

In both novels, the main characters tend to vacillate between challenging and perpetuating stereotypical understandings of gender and sexuality. In one of her few emotional conversations with Cleo, Lele asks her the following question: "How do you know if someone likes you?" (p. 53). Cleo responds by asking: "What do you mean, Lele? You mean, like a boy?" Cleo reveals her heteronormative assumptions by taking for granted that the object of Lele's affections will be male. Stevi Jackson (1999: 163) defines heteronormativity as the "normative status of heterosexuality which renders any alternative sexualities 'other' and marginal". Lele challenges this by saying "Or a girl" to assert that she could just as easily be asking about a crush on another girl. Cleo "started slightly, but her smile didn't slip" (Herne 2011: 53). However, later in the novel when Lele meets Ash and Saint, she herself perpetuates the heteronormative stereotypes she seemed intent on challenging in this conversation with Cleo. After Saint and Ash help Lele escape from a group of zombies, Lele refers to Saint and "her stuck-up boyfriend" (p. 132). Lele has not seen any indication of romantic involvement, but she assumes that they are a couple. The readers and Lele, however, are privy to a conversation between Saint and Ash in which Saint admits that she "thought she [Lele] was cute. Sexy" (p. 137). Even after this strong indication to the contrary, the assumption of heterosexuality is so strong that Lele later asks Saint: "Why haven't you and Ash ever hooked up?" (p. 221). Saint simply "smile[s]" and answers: "Because, Lele, I'm not into boys". Lele is completely comfortable with Saint's acknowledgement of her lesbian sexuality and reflects: "'Ah'. It made sense: I hadn't forgotten what I'd overheard all those weeks earlier ..." (p. 221).

Lele's apparent comfort with lesbian sexuality comes as somewhat of a surprise, given her earlier interaction with a gay student at her new high school. In this case, she is guilty of blatantly homophobic remarks. One of the boys at her school, Zyed, seems to take an instant dislike to her and she observes his apparent friendship with two female students, Summer and Nyameka. After a confrontation with Zyed, Lele loses her temper and tells him: "And in this school, I see even the bitches run in packs. All three of them" (p. 57). Zyed "flinche[s]" and Lele reflects that she has "already soused him out" by noticing "the way his eyes followed Thabo [a male student at Malema High School] whenever he was around" (p. 57). By

feminising male homosexuality, Lele is making very stereotypical, and homophobic, assumptions about sexuality. When Thabo tries to talk to Lele about the incident, the text also suggests that homosexuality is a taboo topic. Thabo says: "But you shouldn't have said that, Lele. Implied that …" (p. 61). The ellipsis indicates that Thabo regards male homosexuality as unspeakable. Lele, who is new to this Cape Town society, responds by asking: "That he liked boys? So what? What's the big deal? (p. 61). Thabo explains that "[i]t is a big deal" because the "Resurrectionists are against same-sex relationships" because "[t]hey need [humans] to breed" (p. 61). This attitude serves as a further reminder that the Resurrectionists operate by policing expressions of gender and sexuality that are deemed to be acceptable by the heteronormative social majority.

Anne Balay (2012: 924) notes that "gay people have become more prominent in fiction for Young Adult audiences", and Goldstein and Phelan (2009: 33) confirm the "growing assimilation of gay characters into young adult literature". Goldstein and Phelan (2009: 33) observe that, in much young adult fiction, "many characters just happen to be gay: their homosexuality is not the main issue". Although these characters' homosexuality is peripheral to the main plot, it does reveal some of the common struggles gay youth experience in contemporary South African society. Allister Butler et al. (2003: 3) note that, in "post-apartheid South Africa, the tenets of inclusivity, nondiscrimination, and tolerance are actively encouraged and legislated across all sectors of society, including education". However, in their research on the experiences of a number of gay high school students, "it became apparent that they had all experienced discrimination, isolation, and nontolerance within their high school contexts" (p. 3). One prevalent manifestation of homophobia was identified as "peer harassment", with the majority of participants reporting "daily incidents of verbal harassment by school peers", and they "articulated the pain, humiliation, and fear that this constant barrage of derogatory epithets had on their sense of self" (p. 11). It seems that the pressures on gay youth that persist in post-apartheid South Africa also endure in the post-apocalyptic society that survived the zombie attack.

Zyed is undoubtedly represented as an unsympathetic character, and it may be tempting to overlook Lele's homophobic taunt. Goldstein and Phelan (2009: 33) remind us that "adolescence is a time of experimentation and shifting identities", and Lele's apparently contradictory attitudes towards homosexuality reveal a character in the process of forming her own understandings of gender and sexuality. Her comment to Zyed exposes the extent to which constructions of sexuality and gender are interwoven and mutually dependent. Jackson (1999: 181) is concerned that "what passes as radical these days does not envisage the end of gender hierarchy or the collapse of institutionalized heterosexuality, but simply a multiplying of genders and sexualities or movement between them". She cautions against such an

approach by explaining: "But seeking to undo binary divisions by rendering their boundaries more permeable and adding more categories to them ignores the hierarchical social relations on which the original binaries were founded" (p. 181). The most fundamental, original boundary remains the gendered one of male/female and the concomitant hierarchy privileges masculinity while marginalising femininity. When Lele is angry and wants to diminish Zyed's standing in the social microcosm of their high school milieu, she does so by feminising him. Calling him a "bitch" has less to do with his sexuality than with ascribing a feminine identity to him. Her taunt derives its power from the hierarchical relationship between the two terms in the original gender boundary. While the presence of gay characters in the text might give the impression of radical and alternative constructions of social relations, "the hierarchical social relations on which the original binaries were founded" do, in fact, remain firmly in place (p. 181). A close reading thus reveals how the text confirms the gender norms that it appears to subvert.

Death of a Saint hints at another gender issue that will resonate strongly with contemporary South African readers. The group meets two other survivors of the zombie apocalypse – Scott and Previn. Saint and Lele become separated from Ash and the two young women find themselves alone on an abandoned ship with Scott and Previn. Once they have them captive and isolated on the ship, the threat of rape becomes immediately apparent. Scott euphemistically signals the threat of sexual violence by saying: "And while you're here, there's no reason why all of us shouldn't get to know each other a little better" (Herne 2012: 220). As Scott "moves closer" to Lele, Saint knows exactly what he is intimating and she shouts: "Don't you touch her, you bastard" (p. 220). Lele "can feel [Previn] tugging at [her] clothes" as Scott "yanks at the buttons on [her] jeans". James (2009: 171) notes that, "although alternative ways of being a woman can be explored in the post-disaster future by challenging typical gender roles, paradoxically, these fictions can also operate to support them by stressing the tough girl's sexual desirability ...". When Lele and Saint start fighting back, Previn tries to re-establish conventional gender roles by invoking Saint's sexual appeal. As "Previn and Saint are circling each other", Previn says: "Oh, I like it .... A chick who thinks she can fight. Sexy" (p. 221). Saint responds by saying "Sorry ... I'm not into guys" (p. 221). Previn's retort calls up the chilling spectre of the so-called "corrective" or "curative" rape of lesbians that has become all too common a feature of the lived reality of South African women: "I can change that, Previn says. It wouldn't be the first time" (p. 221). Mkhize et al. (2010: 26) explain that this is a "form of violation [which] is perpetrated with the explicit intention of 'curing' the lesbian of her love for other women" (see also Muholi 2011). They go on to reveal that "survivors of 'curative rape' make it clear that their attackers were interested both in humiliating and punishing them for their choice of

sexual identity and lifestyle and in 'transforming' them – by coercion – into heterosexual women" (p. 26).

Saint and Lele's fighting skills enable them to escape. Later, when Ash tries to find out what happened on the ship, the text suggests the silence that continues to surround the topic of rape. Saint reminds Ash that "Lele's tough. She's been through worse" (Herne 2012: 226). Even though he cannot bring himself to say the word "rape", he asks "But they didn't – ". Saint similarly chooses not to speak the word and merely responds by saying "No" (p. 226). Ash is aware of the tendency of women to blame themselves when they are victimised by sexual predators and he asks Lele: "It's not your fault, you know that, right?" (p. 229) Although Lele answers "Course", her unspoken reflections reveal just how deeply even this apparently street smart young woman has internalised the notion that women are to blame. She muses: "But I keep thinking: What if I hadn't got drunk? What if I'd listened to Ash? Stupid. I wish I could climb outside my body and give myself a good shake" (p. 229). She constructs herself as stupid and deserving of punishment for getting herself into a situation where she was vulnerable to rape. Karen Weiss (2010: 294) confirms that "many female victims see themselves as partially responsible for sexual victimization or anticipate that others will blame them or see them as deserving". In particular, she notes that women "who drink to the point of intoxication may feel responsible for having gotten drunk and placing themselves in vulnerable positions" (Weiss 2010: 294; see also Pitts & Schwartz 1997; Richardson & Hammock 1991). When Lele says that she had "stupidly drunk [herself] into a stupor" (p. 227), she is thus enacting a blame script that is profoundly gendered and allows the responsibility to be deflected from the perpetrators to the survivors of sexual assault. Even as the novel reveals how Lele perpetuates these disempowering gender narratives, it also represents both young women as fighting back successfully against their would-be rapists. The text insists that, despite being physically smaller than Scott and Previn, Lele and Saint's destiny will not be determined by their biology. Lele watches as Previn "towers over [Saint], but [she] know[s] this won't make any difference" (p. 221). In addition to his advantage of size, Previn is armed and he "lashes out wildly with the knife". However, "even after who knows how many drinks Saint is more than a match for him" (p. 221). In seemingly no time, she has disarmed him and "[k]neeling on Previn's back she makes short work of tying up his hands and feet" (p. 223). Lele notices that, while she has "often seen Saint in fight mode before", she does not "think [she has] ever seen her so furious" (p. 223). It appears that her fury can be traced back to a combination of the threat of physical violation and the ostensibly smaller humiliations of being called sexist names. When the attack starts, Scott calls Saint "sweetheart" and she responds by insisting "I'm not your sweetheart" (p. 219). In a rhetorical move that signals how women's discursive disempowerment facilitates their corporeal vulnerability, Scott says, "Not

yet, you're not" (p. 219). It seems that Saint is still smarting from being called "sweetheart" when, during the fight scene, Previn says: "You're dead, bitch" (p. 222). Since Saint now has the upper hand in the fight, she is able to retaliate and says, "Call me names again, and I'll kick you even harder where it hurts" (p. 222). Saint refuses to be categorised either by the derogatory labels of Previn or by the connotations of sanctity and virtue that one would normally associate with her name.

Another example of how "post-apocalyptic fiction ... becomes a terrain for both contesting present gender roles and helping to perpetuate them" (Inness 1999: 123) can be found in these novels' representation of the politics of reproduction and maternity. Cleo pulls strings to get Lele admitted to the Malema High School and, when Lele objects, she reminds her that she is "extremely lucky to be going to school at all" since "[n]ot everyone gets the chance" (p. 11) and that this will present her with the "chance at a career". Lele's reflections on Cleo's comments provide some insight into the gender politics of reproduction and maternity that have survived the zombie apocalypse:

> I hate to admit it, but she was right. And the alternative wasn't pretty. Marriage. Breeding. Two of the girls at my old school had left to get married when they were fifteen; ... there were loads of young mothers and fathers, many of them not much older than me, carrying babies and pulling toddlers around by the hand.
>
> (Herne 2012: 11)

Lele finds the adjustment so difficult that she "even considered dropping out of school and joining the breeders" (p. 33). However, she decides against this because she "seriously couldn't imagine [herself] pushing out babies for the rest of [her] life". In a discussion of a thriving black market trade, it emerges that, along with insulin and antibiotics, one of the most precious and scarce commodities is condoms. Lele is shocked when she hears this and Thabo explains: "Birth control. Not everyone wants to breed, you know" (p. 228). In its concern with women being forced into roles as "breeders", *Deadlands* is reminiscent of Margaret Atwood's well-known dystopian text *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986). Atwood's exploration of post-apocalyptic maternity reflects her "focus on the political urgency surrounding women's reproductive rights in the latter decades of the Twentieth Century" (Montelaro 1995: 233). The anxiety that the feminist gains that women have made will be swept aside in favour of a "compulsory return to reproductive and maternal roles as primary determinants of their social status" (p. 233) also emerges in these post-apocalyptic zombie texts produced in the context of South Africa in the twenty-first century.

While it is salutary that young female characters want "people to be able to be together without being forced to have children" (Herne 2011: 240), the terminological choices should give feminist literary critics some cause for

concern. "Breeding" and "pushing out children" are described as options that are not "pretty". Such a pejorative view of reproduction is problematic and it fails to serve feminist politics. It echoes the fairly dated feminist debate where feminists found "difficulty in critiquing motherhood without denigrating mothering" (Kelly 2009: 170). In her groundbreaking feminist text, *The Second Sex,* Simone de Beauvoir ([1949]1997: 536) for instance, challenged the gendered preconception "that maternity is enough in all cases to crown a woman's life". She insists that "[i]t is nothing of the kind. There are a great many mothers who are unhappy, embittered, unsatisfied" (p. 536). De Beauvoir goes further to contest the idealised construction of motherhood by noting that "[m]aternity is usually a strange mixture of narcissism, altruism, idle daydreaming, sincerity, bad faith, devotion and cynicism" and, "while maternal devotion may be perfectly genuine, this, in fact, is rarely the case" (p. 528). Lele seems to employ the vocabulary of classic feminist texts "in which motherhood is considered to be a key factor in women's oppression" (Rye 2009: 24). While motherhood that is enforced by the Resurrectionist state is undoubtedly an oppressive patriarchal strategy, Lele leaves no room for the possibility that some people may have chosen motherhood and that they find some aspects of the experience rewarding or pleasurable. Ann Snitow (1992: 33) argues that, in dismissing and disparaging motherhood, feminists have "toned down and tuned out a more elusive discussion of what choice might mean if there were really two imaginable lives for women – with and without children". Maura Kelly (2009: 170) rightly asserts that "a feminist agenda that serves all women must acknowledge and support women who choose to mother as well as those who do not". In *Death of a Saint,* men, rather than women, are portrayed as having nurturing instincts. However, by idealising maternal men while denigrating women who choose to "push out" children, the novel does little to challenge what Kelly refers to as oppressive "maternalist ideology" (p. 170). Ginger finds a young hyena, which he insists on keeping and naming Bambi. His interactions with the animal are represented as markedly maternal as he is shown to be "beaming down at the hyena" (p. 129) and protectively "cuddl[ing] Bambi closer to his chest" (p. 157). The group of survivors, of which Megan forms a part, consists of three other women and two men. When the two groups meet, Lele notices that one of them is holding "a baby swaddled in some kind of fur blanket" (p. 154). Ginger is most interested in the infant and he is the one who fusses and coos over the baby's "cute name" when Megan tells them that she is called Artemesia. Lele describes "the man holding the baby" (p. 157) as follows: "Unlike that of the shaven-headed women his hair is fairly long, gathered into a ponytail at the nape of his neck. The baby mewls and Ponytail's companion – a slight guy with shaggy dreadlocks – fusses with the blanket" (p. 157). The novel exposes the association of mothering with womanhood when "Ginger beams at the group of women" and asks, "Which one of you is

her mum?" (p. 157). One of the women, Moreka, laughs and "nods towards the guy with dreadlocks" before answering, "That would be Tumi there" (p. 158). Ginger later asks Megan about the "guys with the baby" (p. 161) and she simply responds that Tumi and Stefan are "brilliant parents" (p. 161) and that "Artemesia is *so* lucky to have them" (p. 161). Kelly notes the need for "some space [to be] created between 'mother' and 'woman'" (p. 170), but she cautions that this "challenge need not reject mothering but rather should seek to distance female identity from mothering in a way that benefits all women" (p. 171). While the representation of male mothering contributes to creating these spaces, the texts' scornful allusions to women and mothering prevent them from meeting this challenge.

Jones (2012: 11) suggests that, "[l]ike a zombie, patriarchal dominance should be of the past: it lingers, and may not be cognizant of the horror it evokes, yet it persists as an unwelcome and troubling presence". Even as the zombie apocalypse in these novels causes enough ruptures in the existing social structures to imagine alternative understandings of gender and sexuality, the subversive potential remains largely unrealised. It is certainly positive to see representations of gay characters and strong, courageous girls in fiction for young adults. Futuristic zombie novels such as these offer representational spaces in which authors can explore sexuality and gender roles. Inness (1999: 123) notes that, in the "world of the post-apocalyptic narrative, women are freer to act tough and be independent because it is evident that the world has been turned topsy-turvy". Yet, girls acting like boys and women asserting their lesbian identity are not activities that are, in themselves, sufficient to destabilise gender and heteronormative power structures. While the texts subvert certain gender norms and conventions, others are reinforced. The persistence of existing gender hierarchies still renders the women vulnerable to gang rape, ensures that a gay high school student is taunted because of his sexuality, limits women's choices in terms of maternity and leaves them in a no-win situation when it comes to their appearance. A close feminist reading of *Deadlands* and *Death of a Saint* reveals that the most insidious threat is patriarchal constructions rather than the zombies that linger at the margins of the survivors' world.

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